

The illustration is a high-contrast, black-and-white style drawing on a yellowish-tan background. It depicts a man wearing a wide-brimmed hat, sitting on a large rock in the foreground. He is facing away from the viewer, looking out towards a range of mountains in the distance. To his left is a large, detailed evergreen tree. The background features more distant, smaller trees and a clear sky. The overall mood is one of solitude and wilderness.

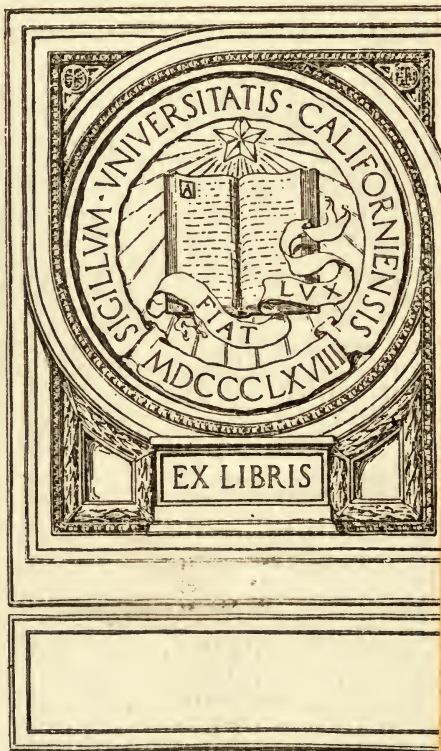
T H E YELLOW TRAIL

by

E. Manchester Boddy

THE YELLOW TRAIL

BODDY



**TIMES-MIRROR
PRESS
LOS ANGELES**

T H E YELLOW TRAIL



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THE YELLOW TRAIL

(A Story of Salmon River Gold)

BY

E. MANCHESTER BODDY

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DEDICATION

To Mrs. Theodore Keehn, whose untiring efforts during the late world war provided so many books for blind soldiers, this book is affectionately dedicated.

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CHAPTER I

PETER ALDEN, JR., drifted into Moapa, Montana, with the first November snow. The town was cold and already dark when he faced its long, half-deserted streets that barely separated snowed-in houses and ended in a trading center dismal and dreary in the pale yellow of street lights.

The frigid aspect of the night meant little to Pete as he leaned against the wind and walked defiantly into it. His skin was stung with cruel biting lashes, and he wanted it so. Perhaps it would deaden the infernal gnawing of his conscience. It would punish him outwardly, anyhow, and that would help. He pressed on. Long into the night he fought his way from one deserted street to another, retracing his steps a dozen times. Try as he would, however, he could not shake his tormentor from him. In desperation he challenged it to bear witness to his self-inflicted punishment. It scoffed at him. "No use trying," he muttered, and stopped short. The warm light of a saloon flooded the frozen sidewalk. With faltering step and heavy heart he turned, faced the door, and let the wind hurl him into the refuge of sickening smoke and stale liquor. No

use fighting when the man within you turns enemy!

Pete looked about him and thanked God he knew no one in Moapa, that he didn't have to smile, apologize, or explain to anyone. So far as the two dozen or so loafers about him knew, he had a perfect right to be there! He sank into a three-legged low-seated chair and hoisted his feet to the rail about the stove.

For a few moments he stared, as though fascinated, at the dull red spots on the heater.

"Hello there, young feller, have a drink."

Pete looked into a coarse repulsive face. He didn't like the man. At any other time he would have refused to drink with him. But now, he had no judgment. If he had, why was he here? When had his judgment ever guided him aright? Never! He would play it just the opposite from now on! Anyhow, was there a human too low for him to drink with? If there was, he'd like to meet him! He would drink with this man, with any man, as long as his money lasted! So declaring, he rose from his seat and strode toward the bar, where the stranger stood, hat pushed back on his head and his fingers beating an idle tattoo on the heavy oak.

"Thanks, stranger, I'll be glad to"—Pete's greeting seemed a trifle mechanical and he added, "Rotten night, isn't it?"

"Oh, not so bad, not so bad. 'Spect this here, ya know. Stranger in these parts?"

Pete hesitated, "Well, rather, I'm from farther west. Let's drink."

"Knew you wasn't a scissor-bill," the man apologized. "You look good enough to drink with me."

Pete winced.

"Whiskey," they ordered together.

The first drink only aggravated matters. More followed. Within an hour Pete found himself in the center of a half dozen or so drunken loafers. The more he drank, the more he felt himself to be one of them. Raising his glass and with bitter sarcasm accentuated by the drooping corners of his mouth, he proposed a toast:

"Here's to what I ought to be," and he poured half his liquor into the gutter by the bar, "and here's to what I am, the rottenest one of you all!" and he drained his glass. Whiskey, drink after drink, from a coarse brown bottle followed. As he drank, he talked. Something in his manner and speech convinced the man who first spoke to him that the stranger from "further west" might be worth knowing better. Gently, but surely, he separated Pete from the crowd and made for a warm corner behind the stove.

"Stranger, you're gettin' drunk," he began.

"My name's Garret, Buller Garret. Some of 'em calls me Bull, but that's only because my front name's Buller. I ain't so bad as I looks. I know you didn't sort of go crazy about me when I braced you here awhile back. But that's all right. You're packin' a lot of trouble 'round with you, I can tell. Now jes' suppose you unload it on Buller. Why, damme, I've had more trouble than a mangy coyote and I allus knows what to do. Now jes' talk about it and tell Bull, what say, hey, pardner?"

Pete needed no urging. For over two weeks he had talked to no one. Buller's soft voice came like music to his deadened senses and he plunged hungrily into a drunken jabber.

"God," he began, "s'been a long time since I got cry—cryin' drunk, not drunk now, though. Tha's one thing I won't do, ain't so sure, tho—Mebbe I'll—I'll—guess I'll get drunk. You drunk, Bull—Bull—Bully? Ha! Ha! Ha, Ha, Bully, tha's a good one, Bully—tell me—Bull—'m I drunk?"

"'Course not. You're jes' goin' to tell your old pal, Buller, who you are an' all about it, you're—"

"That's right, Pete, tha's me. Peter Alden. Bully an' Peter, tha's good! Ha, ha! But Peter ain't so good, ain't no good, an' Peter knows it. All of 'em know it. It's no go, Bully, s'no go. I'm a bad lot to hang around

with; know who I am? Peter Alden! Peter Alden, Jr.—heavy on the jar. Old man Alden's worthless son, San Francisco, tha's the place, damn The City. Old man's got a bank there, got lots of banks. Needed 'em to keep Peter J-a-r goin'. Old Man's . . ."

The bad whiskey and warm foul air wilted Peter's brain, and he sank helplessly to the floor. Buller wanted to hear more, but experience told him Pete was through talking. He winked heavily for the barkeeper.

"Slip me a coupla blank checks. Got a live one. He'll think he's signin' up at the Club. Old man's a banker Frisco way, too; cinch, mor'n' likely lost son. Nice boy; we're sorry, ain't we?"

* * * *

In San Francisco, Peter Alden, Sr., bank president and financier, with far flung interests throughout the Pacific Northwest, paced the deep carpet of his private office. His face was haggard and his strong, broad shoulders, ordinarily carrying fifty-five years with the grace of youth, sagged forward helplessly. During his many years of active business life he had often been called upon to face stern facts. Always his judgment had been tempered with justice and humane principles, and he had won praise for many things. But to him, most gratifying of all, next to his reputation for ab-

solute honesty and justice, was the love and esteem of his friends, of whom he counted many. One, in particular, old Judge Stivers, John, he called him, had been for twenty years his constant companion and adviser.

He was waiting for the Judge now as he paced nervously back and forth. Presently the door opened and a thin, slightly stooped man of sixty entered. His grey beard and mustache formed a perfect van dyke, quite in keeping with his well-groomed appearance generally.

"Good morning, John. Sit down." Alden indicated a chair near his desk and finished his course across the room.

The Judge seemed entirely aware that something unusual was in the air. "What's the trouble, Peter? What's wrong?"

"It's he," Alden pointed to a large framed picture on his desk. "He's gone; ugly rumors about town."

"But you told me only two days ago everything was settled!"

"Yes, settled for two days. Here are the papers just as I fixed them." Alden tapped a heap of matter before him. "These are bills, thousands of dollars. I arranged privately to pay them, on condition that the creditors would continue to demand payment from him. Only way to do it, John. I arranged a position for him as cashier with the Pacific Central lines.

He wouldn't work for me. The girls, yes * * here are the letters. Settled them all. Damn vampires! But everything was straight as a die, John, just as the boy told it to me, and they couldn't deny it!"

The Judge looked mystified. All of this he had heard before.

Alden caught the expression. His shoulders came back with a snap and the old fighting glint, the look that had made many a board of rebellious directors come to terms, flamed in his eye. His fist came down with a bang.

"John, my boy might be wild. He doesn't know the value of money. He might and has made mistakes with women, but my boy has never lied to me, and *he is not a thief!*" Alden's voice thundered the last sentence out as he threw a telegram before the astonished Judge.

John Stivers had never in twenty years seen his friend assert himself so violently. He quickly adjusted his glasses and read:

"Peter Alden, Sr.,
Alden National Bank, San Francisco.

Your son missing all efforts to locate him have failed
safe robbed fifty thousand dollars looks bad advise
action at once.

Geo. Stone, Gen. Mgr.,
Pacific Central Ry. Co."

Alden pulled up in front of the Judge and waited.

"Well?" he thundered as the former laid the message down and calmly placed his glasses

in his pocket. "Well, well! You see that? My God, man! They've called my son a thief! A thief! An Alden a thief! Missing, bah! He gave me his word, I tell you; he *can't* be missing! A thief!" With the rage of a strong man gone wild, Alden circled about, pounding and stamping alternately.

The Judge grasped his first opportunity.

"Now, now, Peter," he urged, "I know your boy. Why, I've raised him as much as you have. He's no thief, certainly not. There's some mis—"

"Mistake nothing!" thundered Alden. "It's a lie. It's a trick! They're making a goat out of an Alden. I'll have none of it. John, you produce that boy! Call the detectives. Spend money; you know how to do it. *But get that boy!*"

"Quiet, Peter, quiet. Don't lose your head; if there's crooked work here, all the more reason to be calm. There's lots of time. Come, sit down."

Reluctantly, Alden gave way to utter exhaustion and sank into his chair. "What can we do, John, what can we do? I'm all broken up. Couldn't sleep last night. Felt something was wrong with Peter. Something awfully wrong, John."

A secretary knocked timidly at the door. The Judge bade her enter, and took a special

delivery letter from her hand. Both men recognized the handwriting at the same instant. Alden reached for it with savage eagerness, tore it open, and read:

"Dear Dad:

By this time you've had the truth. God knows I've done enough in the past to kill your trust. Now I've broken my word. I don't care about the money. I knew you paid the bills, as you always do. Where I'm going it won't cost you anything. I'm just worthless, Dad, just worthless. I might be a man some day, I'm not promising any more. But if I ever am, I'll come back. Until then, I only hope you won't be hurt too much. Think the best you can of me under the circumstances. Never mind where I'm going. I don't know.

Your loving son,
Peter."

Without a word Alden passed the letter to his friend. For fully a minute neither spoke.

Alden was first to break the silence. His face was blanched, his voice weak with evident pain, and poorly concealed emotion. He placed a trembling hand on the shoulder of his friend.

"John," his voice shook as he spoke, "fix the papers. He isn't my son any more. Stop the news if you can. Don't mention his name any more. You understand? I'm—I'm going out now. Good-bye, John. Come to the house tonight. I'll be alone there now."

"Peter, do you value the word of an old friend? Listen, your boy did not—could not—wait Peter. Listen, I can prove it, I can—"

"John, you have his letter. That settles it. Don't mention it again. Please, John, don't mention it again. Good-bye."

* * * *

CHAPTER II

“**C**OME on, you! Whadda think this is, free lodgin’ joint? Come on, outside, bum! Outside!”

Pete stared blankly. Bum? Outside? He blinked reflectively. Someone was rudely kicking the soles of his feet! He drew them under him and sat up. A burly roustabout hung over him.

“Well, keep movin’, keep movin’. Can’t *live* here! Been sleepin’ all night now; come on, outside!”

Slowly Pete roused himself. The room seemed strange, nothing familiar greeted him, and it was horribly dirty. He staggered unsteadily to his feet. His stomach felt sick and his head ached. Many lights, with strange colors, danced before his eyes. He apologized to the roustabout and started uncertainly for the bar.

“Got any money?” the barkeeper growled as he approached.

Pete fumbled foolishly at a pocket. Nothing came out. He tried another, nothing there.

“Guess not. Where am I?”

“ ’Bout three jumps this side of the hoos-

gow. Here, drink this." The bartender shoved a hot whiskey toward him.

Pete gulped it down and started for the door. The sun cast a sickly light through the murky window panes. Outside a boy was shouting, "Moapa Press—Sunday morning paper—All about the Pis-siffic Central robbery."

"Pacific Central," "Moapa," the words hung in Pete's fevered brain. A new feeling came into his stomach. "Great safe robbery—morning paper—five cents, thanks mister, mornin' paper. Oh, ho-o-o!"

Pete tried to think, as he made again for the door. A paper, that was it—he wanted a paper, of course. Again he fumbled at his pocket. No money. His head was clearer now. Perhaps he could find a paper in the saloon. He turned about and commenced an unsuccessful staggering search about the room.

The little Moapa Press, with feature stories always several days, sometimes a week late, could have given Pete real news. There, within his grasp, had been a sensational story of an unknown thief who stole fifty thousand dollars from a cashier's safe, his safe, on the very night he had so mysteriously disappeared. Clouded as his brain was, it would have been stunned into drastic action by the thought of the effect the incriminating news must have on his father. But the newsboy and his shouting

moved on down the street. Pete, after several unsuccessful rounds in the immediate proximity of the bar, forgot the paper.

The little saloon began to teem with men. Men of a different stamp than the loafers of the night before. Brisk, energetic men of the hills and plains! Pete was forgotten in the throng, and as his head and eyes cleared, and his walk became steadier, he envied the open laughs and hearty handshakes about him. How strong and sturdy the men seemed in their huge coon and bear skin coats! Wistfully, he searched for someone in the crowd to whom he could measure up. He had the frame—yes, he was even taller than most of them. He caught a glimpse of his face in the dirty mirror behind the bar and turned disgustedly from the sickly white thing he saw. He looked at his feet. Soft thin shoes, all right for the Blue Bird Cafe. A disgrace here! He tried to hide them.

The mirror, magnet-like, again drew his eyes. A dirty white collar! The only one in the room! A necktie! No wonder the bar-keeper had ordered him thrown out. He sulked to the back of the room. Here a lunch counter was doing a rushing business. The savory odor of frying meat and boiling coffee drew him on. Every stool was occupied. Steaming stacks of hot-cakes, ham and eggs, sausage,

steaks, fried onions and potatoes were emerging from the long low stove in miraculously large quantities. Thick bowls of steaming coffee were shoved across the counter with every order.

Pete slid onto the first vacant stool.

"Eggs—soft—toast—coffee," he ordered.

The waiter looked him over and growled insultingly. "Let's see your money."

Pete shrank back in confused humiliation. The waiter hadn't asked this of anyone else! Peter Alden, Jr., alone asked to show his money before he could eat breakfast in the back end of a saloon! The thought maddened him. For two weeks he had condemned, vilified and insulted himself. Now for the first time in his life another man dared do it! In an instant the Alden flash mingled with bloodshots in his eye. Something hot rushed up his spine, swept his head and flushed his face. The waiter wavered before the menacing glare.

"You damn hound! Come over here and you'll be passin' out eggs in hell! *Come out*, I say, before I crawl over and drag you out!"

Pete's knees sought the edge of the counter as his long arms shot out. Then as his fingers sank deep into bushy hair, he snapped out a curse, braced his knees, and yanked. With frenzied strength he slammed the man's head, face down, against the hard oak counter.

Three times he smashed the face into it before two roustabouts sprang upon him from behind and dragged him the full length of the room and out into the street!

Badly shaken and dizzy, still trembling with rage, he scrambled up. Drifted snow had kept the door open a few inches. Loud voices sounded within.

"You talked to a *man* that time, Fat."

"Who said that feller was a stew?"

"Looks like the goods to me, he does."

"Tell him to come in and have a drink."

"Lay off 'im, barkeep. Fat called him first; I'm inviting him in."

The door opened and a bronze faced figure in heavy furs stepped out and spoke to him.

"Stranger, I'm Brud Hawkins, sort of native 'round here. Come in and be sociable. Fat, in here, got you wrong. Sorry about it."

Pete liked the clean-cut look of the man.

"Guess I'm a little wrong myself," he apologized and walked first through the door.

Hawkins jerked a thumb at the bar.

"Thanks," Pete hesitated. "Guess I'm through drinkin'—like to be sociable, though."

"Fair enough. A man can't drink *all* the time." Hawkins observed the undeniable evidence of Pete's all-night drunk. "Eat?"

Pete looked at the counter. A new waiter was on the job.

"Thanks."

Then he ordered, "Eggs, soft—toast, coffee."

* * * *

CHAPTER III

MOAPA had long been the peaceful trading center of the Salmon River Valley. Founded originally by a horde of adventurous gold hunters, it still presented the appearance of a typical Western mining town. For years past, however, the fertile valley in which it stood had gradually yielded its wooded land to the aggressive march of logging camps and sawmills. Ranchers, too, mostly cattle and sheep men, followed the lumber men, and not a small portion of the winter population of Moapa was now made up of these.

After the early rush for gold had come and gone only the activities of placer miners in Salmon Tooth Gulch remained to give to Moapa its rugged, picturesque population. Gulch Creek, cutting its way through gorges and valleys, came roaring through the very center of the Saw Tooth Mountains, carrying its winter cargo of ice and snow through dangerous gorge-like passes and finally out into the Salmon River itself.

For years hundreds of hardy men with sluice-boxes, pans, picks and shovels gathered in gold from the rich gravel along this stream. But of late years the shallow surface work of

these hand laborers became less and less profitable, and it finally became apparent that the old method of gravel washing would have to give way to machinery and modern dredges.

At least, so said the men behind the Salmon River Gold Co., Incorporated. These promoters, foraging wolves far from the Wall Street packs, had entered the peaceful mountains of the Salmon Tooth Gulch country with flashy paper, a "fool's gold" new to the miners, and with plausible schemes and enticing promises. As a result, first one strategic concession and then another was sewed up tight before the wily operators showed their hand. Salmon Tooth Pass, always dangerous, but the only outlet to civilization the miners had, should be made safe and always passable, they urged. This required capital. The miners were scattered and divided. J. D. Browning, king of promoters, beneficently undertook the task. The pass was safe now, safely in the clutches of the Salmon River Gold Company, Inc. Slowly, but surely, the strong arm of capital, directed by the hand of the same master, consolidated the placer claims along the stream, weeding out with ruthless regularity as it did so, the hapless victims of its conquest. From the first, resistance had been weak and scattered. Miners always had hard luck stories it would seem, and when they brought pleas for

justice to Moapa, they were told to take their grievances to the proper authorities. Yet at the Government Land Offices new strange faces greeted them. The city and county offices, too, were filled with strangers; and all of them seemed to be interested only in the welfare of the Gold Company. Miners, real ones, are prone to seek refuge in the hills, forgetting the old diggings and hunting new ones. Hope, millions just ahead, a grub stake and a new claim, satisfy the most of them.

So it was with the placer miners along Gulch Creek, and Browning, immaculate, suave, seldom allowing himself to become identified in the execution of his grasping schemes, felt that he was approaching complete success. His engineers' reports indicated a near-monopoly of mining ground along the creek, which meant fabulous wealth if used as the nucleus of a great Wall Street promotion. Already he had prepared glowing prospectuses for his New York henchmen, who operated under the name of Sharpe & Company, and these Wall Street brokers had, in fact, begun to flood the country with stock of the Salmon River Gold Company.

"To hell with the gold," was Sharpe's message to Browning. "If we get it, so much the better. Main thing, tie up all Salmon River

claims. Remember, we can *always* mine the public."

Browning, "J. D." he was called, understood. Salmon River was his discovery, at least from the Wall Street point of view. "The only gold-producing placer section in Montana that can be monopolized" was his boast, and he proposed to demonstrate it.

He had no doubt he could, but he winced when he thought of the prospectuses, already sent broadcast throughout the country, announcing complete success. A disturbing premonition that he might have rushed things too rapidly bothered him. An intangible uneasiness made him increasingly nervous and irritable, until at last, in spite of heavy Saturday night snow, the first of the coming winter, he had scribbled a hasty summons to his engineer, and ordered Slim Eliot, the 'breed, to deliver it and produce the engineer for a conference the following day.

It was late afternoon when J. D. bit into his tenth cigar and ordered the meeting to business. At his right sat Peleg Demons—engineer, and directly before him, Ern Houston—lawyer.

Both men shifted uneasily before the apparent ill humor of their chief.

Browning lost no time in preliminaries.

Leaning toward Demons, he asked: "What's left?"

Demons squirmed but answered shortly, "Most of it."

"Most of hell—man—I'm not asking if you've tied up all Montana. How many groups are left on the stream?"

"One, but" Demons began.

"No buts; which one? Answer my question. How much mining territory is left up that Gulch?"

"One group, the Dead Horse, twenty-five claims, but it's *not* placer ground."

"Well, that's one. How many more?"

"None."

"Then, why the 'but'?"

"The Dead Horse struck it rich, there's gold there, solid veins of it. They've struck the mother lode. The Dead Horse is worth more than all the placer ground we've got."

At this astounding news Browning tried hard to appear unconcerned, as he rolled his cigar between his teeth and asked:

"Do they know it?"

"No. Only three men on the job there."

"Whose men?"

"Ours," Demons replied, and noted with relief the hint of a smile that played on Browning's face as he rose.

"All right, Demons," he added more cor-

dially. "Keep it up. Leave the signing to Houston here. You better go back now, and cover up the strike. If anybody knows too much. . . . " Browning shook his head meaningly, then added: "Remember, nobody knows about this strike! Good-bye."

The two men waited until the sound of Demons' clattering boots was well down the hallway, then Browning turned to Houston.

"Dead Horse, Dead Horse," he repeated reflectively, "that'll be Brud Hawkins, won't it?"

Houston nodded his reply. He seldom spoke.

"Been working on him?"

The lawyer nodded again.

"Well?"

"Can't budge him. Holding out on principle."

"Principles, hell; whoever heard of Brud Hawkins having principles?"

"He's got 'em, J. D.—he's got 'em."

"Try stock?"

"Yes."

"Money?"

"Yes."

"Threats?"

"Yes."

"Bluff?"

Browning repeated, this time ending with a long drawn out, "Well?"

Silent Ern never bluffed until he had to. It hurt deep to lose, and he was seldom hurt.

Again Browning repeated, "Well?"

"He offered to buy *us* out," Houston finally confessed.

"What?" Browning sprang to his feet, "You don't mean—he can't—you think Hawkins knows what he's got up there?"

"No, but he thinks he's holding a trick at that. And so do I."

"Come on, cut out this infernal mystery stuff, Ern, what's he got—what's his game—what can *he* do anyway, damn mountain gopher—God, man, do you realize what this means to us?"

Houston nodded.

Browning sat down, puffed and thought.

For five silent minutes his cigar melted like the sand in an hour-glass, until with characteristic decision he ended his meditation by banging a clenched fist on the table before him. Then with the precision of the master executive, he reached for the 'phone and ordered a connection.

"Salmon Tooth Pass, give me Jenkins," he snapped into the receiver.

Two minutes more and the bell rang.

"Hello, Jenkins? Browning speaking.

How's the pass? All right? Well, listen and get this right. This snow's going to wreck the pass tonight. Quit snowing there, you say? Fool, I said the pass would be *wrecked tonight*. Let only J. D. men thru. Got it? All right, good-bye."

Browning ordered another connection. The bell rang sooner this time.

"Hello! Gold Nugget Saloon? J. D. talking. Want to see Buller Garret, right away. Good-bye."

As Browning hung up the receiver, he turned to Houston with an air of finality and said: "Ern, something tells me this is going to be a fight. Hawkins' assessment work isn't done, of course?"

Houston shook his head. "Not only done, but the claim's patented."

"Claim's patented? How can it be?" Browning groaned in utter exasperation. "Didn't the land office bring it to you for O. K?"

"No, it slipped through somehow. Don't think there's been any double crossing, though, just slipped through."

"Now, that's that fool native son of an assistant down there that you sent in for policy's sake!" Browning stormed. "Get him out of there, Ern, get him out of there! Damn your fool policy stuff!" Footsteps sounded in the

hallway, and Browning lowered his voice. "Here comes Garret. Better leave me alone with him, Ern. I've got some orders for Bull that might start you on your policy work again." Houston bit his lip. He had witnessed many a withering assault of sarcasm descend on others, but never before had he felt its sting. Browning caught the feeling in an instant, and changed the tone of his voice as he continued:

"Forget it, Ern, I'm all upset. I didn't mean it. You've been with me five years now. First time you ever thought the other fellow had a chance. No wonder I'm upset."

Browning, the actor, paused a moment to pat silent Ern Houston on the shoulder. That moment was enough.

From the changed expression one would have thought Houston would change places with Bull, the gangster, rather than incur the lasting enmity of his chief. He smiled affectionately and left.

For the first time Garret entered the room without knocking. With narrowed eyes Browning appraised him as he came jauntily up to the desk and helped himself to a chair beside it. Buller's greeting was loud and cheerful. Browning ignored it.

"Been gambling?" Browning's words sounded more like a conclusion than a question.

"No."

"Where did you get it?"

"Get what?"

"Money—cash—the 'stake'."

"I ain't gotta stake, whaddaya mean—money?"

"Oh, yes, you have. Bums like you don't get so cocky when they're broke. Come on, out with it, what have you been doing?"

Bull fumbled at his fur hat and looked at the carpet. "Honest,—I haven't—"

"Come on, hurry up, I want to talk to you. Didn't you promise you wouldn't lie to me any more? Talk fast now and get it out." Browning whirled in his chair and began writing.

Buller hesitated. How did J. D. know? He must have eyes everywhere.

"Well," he commenced, fearing he had already lost his chance to talk to the great J. D. "Well, there was a bloke came into the Gold Nugget, just a washed out bum, I thought, but he got drunk and raved about his dad's banks, and he slipped me a coupla checks, that's all."

"That's something like it; where are they?"

Bull fumbled in his inside pocket and produced two long pink slips of paper.

"What were you going to do with these?" Browning asked disgustedly.

"Cash 'em, if I needed it pretty bad, I guess."

"Fool, tear 'em up. These things'll send you up higher than a kite. I ought to have you run in, right now, for it. Didn't I tell you to keep out of this kind of stuff? One more chance, Bull, that's all you get. Where's the bird that signed them?"

Bull was completely crestfallen, as he answered, humbly, "Drunk, eating breakfast with Brud Hawkins, last I saw him."

"Wait a minute, don't tear 'em up. Eating with Brud Hawkins, was he?"

"Sure."

"Give me those checks, Bull. On second thought, I want to use them myself, to—send—you—up if necessary!"

Bull quavered and handed over the checks. "Please Mr. Browning, please, I didn't mean to use 'em, I didn't—"

"Shut up! Listen. If it wasn't for me, you'd be in jail now, wouldn't you?"

Bull's head sank, and Browning continued.

"Well, I'm still keeping you out. Why did you think I sent for you today?" He paused to let the question sink in, then went on. "You say this bird was eating with Brud Hawkins?" another pause, and then, "Well, how did I know you pulled this trick?" Browning's quick eye caught the gleam that came into

Buller's. "Huh, I've concluded you're getting stupid."

A sudden thought struck Bull: "You mean to say, you mean—you mean this Alden guy's workin' with Hawkins, that Hawkins is on my trail again?"

"Now you're coming to life," Browning eyed him significantly.

"Well, I'm damned." Bull studied the floor as he replied. "I thought he'd dropped houndin' me long ago."

Browning, seeing how quickly he had gained his point, continued: "Bull, I've given you your last chance. We've cleaned your record three times. If Hawkins digs up the old stuff against you again, I'm going to let you go up, that's all. Police court's open Monday. This is Sunday. It's you or Hawkins. Moapa won't miss either of you very much. That's all I have to say. So get out now. I've tipped you off on what's coming, and that's all I can do. I don't want to harm anyone, but this thing's up to—you—now—tonight!"

Hat in hand, humiliation mingled with anger reflected in every action, Buller walked slowly out of the office and made for his gang headquarters.

Browning smiled as his visitor left the room; then settling down comfortably in his

spacious chair, he got Silent Ern on the 'phone.

"Hello, Ern!—has Hawkins got any heirs?—well, if he has by any chance, get a line on them, they might talk business."

* * * *

CHAPTER IV

MEN floundering in the dreary wilderness of self-condemnation and fading hope are as sorely in need of rescuing as though lost in the black depths of trackless jungles.

True, Peter Alden was not lost, though certainly he had wandered far from the trail. Fortunately for him he was still groping for the way out; traveling in circles, perhaps, but at least aware of swamps ahead and still faintly hoping, believing he would somehow escape, and come once more upon the highway of life, of life as he dreamed it might be.

When Brud Hawkins invited him to breakfast in the rear end of the Gold Nugget Saloon, he thought he was feeding a hungry man, and so he was. But Pete's hunger could not be satisfied with food alone. With a wistfulness pathetic in its frankness and simplicity, he looked deep into the soul of the man beside him.

Twice he hung over swallows of coffee as though to break the embarrassing silence his searching look had forced on his companion. Hawkins found it difficult to talk to this man. With none of the ready adaptability of city people in him, he could not instantly shift from expected small talk with a drifting drunkard

to the words so plainly expected by the man who looked at him.

"Guess I want to know who you are, that is, if you like," he announced at the end of an evident appraisal.

"Peter Alden, Jr."

"With the Company?"

"What Company?" Pete seemed bewildered at the question.

"Seems there's only one 'The Company'," Hawkins replied, with a touch of bitterness in his voice—"The Salmon River Gold Company, Incorporated."

"No." Peter shook his head listlessly.

"Just as well. Know you aren't from the camps though. But then there's lots of strangers in Moapa these days. Run into them most everywhere it seems."

Pete caught the air of finality in the words and knew that the acquaintance which seemed to hold so much in store for him would end, unless he chose to talk.

For some reason, he seemed strangely attracted to this man, and for the first time in weeks he persuaded himself to talk. Little by little he unburdened his troubled heart, at first talking only in monosyllables, with little or no feeling. As his story progressed, however, the kindly interest of the elderly moun-

taineer drew him more and more into his subject and out of himself.

"I didn't seem to be fitted for anything," he went on. "First, for my father's sake, I studied medicine. Then, I couldn't practice. Oh, I guess I could, all right," he added as though answering an expression on his companion's face, "but I went to too many afternoon parties" "No," again answering an unspoken question—"not the pink tea kind,—worse than that, for me, anyhow, for all they talked of was New Thought, and the futility of material things, and so on. Anyhow, I got into it enough to lose interest in my profession, so I quit." At this point he hesitated, his whiskey-weakened mouth still registering near despondency. "Of course," he went on, "this was the least of it. I tried banking." His head bobbed up and down a trifle as he mentioned this; he looked queerly at Hawkins and asked:

"Suppose you know how awful capital is?" Then without waiting for a reply, he continued.

"Well, it isn't; but that's what some more friends, social reformers, this time, told me, and for a year I tried to study their ideas, and—well—I wanted really to do something in the world. Sounds funny, doesn't it? Well, I quit banking. You see, Mr. Hawkins, I had everything, yet I really did want to do something. I thought after I had tried most every-

thing else, that maybe, belonging to all the "ism's" and the societies that I'd been studying might help. Huh! Now, as I think of it, I'm not sure whether I know yet what all they were, but they got me more muddled up than ever. I actually thought that the human species was the worst of all animals; that the whole world was wrong, I was wrong, nothing mattered"

Thus Pete went on, describing himself as one of the many men who become entangled in a maze of false philosophy, until, by sheer questioning of motives, analyzing of actions, they first become egotistical of their own mental ability, looking wisely out from their tower of wisdom upon the foolish world that still works, loves, eats and sleeps. Of men, who, having passed through this stage of mental activity, find nothing worth while in life, until they end in losing respect for themselves and acquire nothing but a lazy contempt for others.

He told Hawkins all, unburdening his heart as though he could not halt the rush of words that came to him. He described his affairs with women; with one woman in particular, one who, when he told her he thought he should go back to work, had called him a "silly ass," and ridiculed the idea. He had loved this woman, he thought.

At length he ended his story, and as he did so, a sudden thought came over him. This was

the first time he had ever made a clean confession! He had never spoken *this* way even to his own father! Yet even as he spoke, he knew somehow that he was nearing the path his soul longed to tread. Where it was or how his journey would start, he knew not.

Hawkins listened patiently as Pete talked, considering well every word, and showing plainly by the expression on his face how well he understood the turmoil that had swept the heart of the man who spoke.

As Pete concluded his story, Hawkins tapped him gently on the shoulder. "My boy," he said, "you feel better now, don't you?"

"Yes, much better, I don't know how to explain it, either. God knows I've done nothing to justify it, but I do feel better, Mr. Hawkins, much better."

"It's the telling it, son, it's the telling it. I'm a miner, and I don't know much about all the things you mentioned, but as I see your case, you've been slipping down through soft mud and slush, trying to hit hard-pan. Leastwise, that's how I would call it, and now, you feel like you're on a rock bottom, isn't that it?"

"Good!" Pete smiled for the first time, "that's good, and there's mud up to here," he laughed, running his finger across his chin, "but I've struck bottom, that's it, I've struck bottom!"

"You see," the old miner continued, "we're all alike in the main, just like the hills; some's faulted and some's slipped. Now take me. I've mined hereabouts for twenty odd years, yet there's aplenty in Moapa who'd say that I haven't found my bearings yet. But *I* know I have.

"Then there's that 'thought' idea, you was talking about. Now I believe in thinking. That is, well, in using your brains. Take some miners I know, who spend most of their time figuring out the hows and whys of their tools; yet they never have time to use them! I hold a man shouldn't be figgerin' too much on the how of his brains or his tools either, lest he don't have time to use them! And he's liable to get all muddled up and useless, too!"

Pete nodded his head in vigorous approval, quietly ordering a third cup of coffee for Hawkins, hoping it would hold him longer.

"But it's all had its use, my boy, it's all had its use. Take me. I spent six years chasing fool's gold before I learned how to prospect. But I had to learn, you see. But, after all, it ain't so much the getting of the learnin' that hurts, it's lettin' the learnin' get us that puts us under!"

So saying, Hawkins pushed his coffee from him, cleared his throat, and in an entirely new manner, continued.

"And now, young man, what are you going to do?"

"That's it," Pete replied, "what *am* I going to do? I believe I will be happy to shovel snow, anything. I'm going to work, Mr. Hawkins—w-o-r-k."

"Good," the old miner patted him on the shoulder again. "Have you ever been in the hills?"

"Two summers and one winter, but that was four years ago; roughed it, too. Only thing I've done that still feels good."

"All right; now do you want a real man-sized job in the mountains for this winter?" As he asked the question, Hawkins brought his teeth together and elevated his chin, trying as best he could to give the impression that he was making strictly a business offer.

But Pete knew the open hearted, true blue ring of altruism that prompted the offer.

"Do I?" he answered enthusiastically, "I believe I'd crawl there to get it."

"Not in those clothes." Hawkins' eyes traveled over the erstwhile regalia of a San Francisco club man.

"Oh—I didn't think, hell! But I'll go anyway; tell me how to get there; I'll work around town till I get the clothes."

"No need of that," Hawkins waved the suggestion aside. "Let's talk business. I'm

needing a sort of time-keeper and runner up at the diggin's. Got a crew coming up next week."

"Fine, I can do it!" Pete's eyes swept defiantly around the room. "Just give me a chance!"

"All right, son. Come over and get outfitted. Better get aplenty, might not be coming back for a coupla months; and remember, I'm not paying much. All the mining boys in Moapa have been calling me a fool mountain gopher for years, because I stick to the Dead Horse Mine. Yes, that's where we're going, to the Dead Horse. They all think there's nothing there, but I'll show them." Then he clenched his fists, bent close to Pete's ear and whispered: "Don't talk any about it, but *they're* the fools, every mother's son of 'em, for trading their placer claims for Gold Company stock. They don't think so. But old Gopher Hawkins will be saving them from ruin yet. I'm holding a trick or two. There's two or three Company men that ought to be in jail, but it's too early yet. I'm going to prove that there's gold in the Dead Horse first, then they will believe me!" Before he had finished speaking, the two had passed quietly out of the door.

As Pete greeted the cold street wind he was conscious of a new feeling in his heart; his

head seemed to seek a higher level than was its habit of late. Even his eyes brightened with the spark of new ambition; a spark that might have been a fire but for the blear of whiskey.

At the Moapa Trading Company, Hawkins sought out Burton Smead, manager.

"Fix this young man up for the camp, Smead, build him up from his hide out, gun an' all. Alden, did you say your name was?" Turning to Pete.

"Pete, just call me Pete, please."

"Well, Pete, meet me at the Gold Nugget at noon, we start for the pass at one."

* * * *

CHAPTER V

A GAIN Pete's eyes sought the mirror behind the Gold Nugget Bar. For the first time in months he felt a tinge of genuine pride as he appraised his snug coonskin cap, his burly fur coat and heavy corduroy breeches, tucked deep into high leather boots.

It lacked yet a half hour of being noon, but he paced the length and breadth of the room, impatiently awaiting the coming of Hawkins. He had waited fully twenty minutes of the time, when the door opened and a man, made conspicuous by a shiny badge on his breast and a gun that dangled at his side, entered. Speaking a few words to the bartender, the stranger produced a small roll of hand bills, tacked one of them on the wall, and walked quietly out of the room. Nothing else to do, Pete joined the curious throng to read.

One glance at the poster and Pete stared in wide-eyed horror, as though transfixed! His picture there before him! *He*, wanted for burglary. A \$5000.00 reward posted for *him*, a runaway Pacific Central cashier! The wall danced dizzily before his eyes. His stomach contracted, and his heart leaped up into his

chest. His knees shook as though they would fall from under him!

He, Peter Alden, Jr., a fugitive from justice! "Great God!" he muttered, "what next?" He feared to turn, lest the men on either side might recognize him. The thought made his hair bristle with fear. The whole thing was wrong, horribly wrong. He tried to think back. Fifty thousand dollars taken from his safe! He hadn't been near the safe the day he left, and the money was there when he closed it the day before! Thoughts—forebodings, plans, helplessness raced through his brain in the first panic of the moment. He noticed with some relief that the men beside him didn't seem interested, that they actually walked away. Out of the corner of his eye he observed a strange bar-tender at work. More boldly he viewed the lunch counter. His enemy of the morning, nose red and swollen, eyes discolored, was there, but the noon rush kept him busy.

Hoping to gain the street unobserved, Pete started, as naturally as possible, for the door. Before he could reach it, however, Brud Hawkins pushed it open, and called cheerily:

"Ready, Alden? Let's go." At the sound of his name Pete imagined he felt the concentrated stare of a half dozen pairs of eyes on his back. He hurried through the door, and faced the mountaineer.

"I wouldn't have known you, boy. I wouldn't have known you!" Hawkins exclaimed, his admiring eyes moving slowly from Pete's feet toward his head, when they met his eyes, lingered a moment, then widened in astonishment.

"My God, man, what's wrong?" Pete met the alarmed look of the miner with a straight though badly startled stare. He moistened his lips and jerked his thumb over his shoulder.

"Inside, on wall, look."

Puzzled at the strange manner of his newly made acquaintance, Hawkins frowned slightly and walked through the door.

Feeling miserable beyond words, Pete braced himself against the corner of the building, determined to take the new blow, if it came, as just so much more justly deserved punishment, and let matters run their course.

A moment inside and Hawkins came out. Looking earnestly at Pete, he asked, "Well boy, did you do it?"

Pete looked straight at him and answered, "No."

"Then buck up, son, buck up. You *look* like you might have murdered somebody in the bargain. Come on, we're late, let's go."

Yet even as Hawkins said it, Pete's heart welled with gratitude at the simple straightforwardness of the man. He had known men

for years, but could count on the fingers of one hand those who would so quickly and wholeheartedly dismiss so serious a matter, and accept their own judgment of him as final.

Hawkins, though, was doing far more than this. He was still inviting Pete to accompany him to the mountains; and Pete, unaccustomed though he was to the open life of his new surroundings, quickly caught the unusual spirit of comradeship that prompted Hawkins' words. Yet he hesitated long before he answered.

"No, I don't see how I can," he finally stammered. "I don't care for myself,—but father, poor, dear old dad, it'll kill him, I'm sure it will kill him. I never dreamed of that," waving a hand at the saloon, "when I left, I never dreamed of it."

"Figurin' you were back, could you prove you didn't do it?" Hawkins asked, as he grasped Pete by the arm as though to steady him.

"No," Pete's words grew bitter, "I sneaked away like a thief, I tell you, like a cur dog."

"Then it'll only add more trouble on your father if you're brought back. Better tell him you didn't do it, and come with me. He'll believe you. Anybody would. You're not a liar. Let things work themselves out. They most always do, you know."

Pete hesitated, lingering so long in front of

the saloon, that Hawkins was at length forced to remind him of the danger of recognition, a circumstance which would take from him any chance he might now have of shaping his own course of action. Still uncertain and sick at heart, Pete yielded to the urging of his friend, and the two moved on toward the Moapa Trading Co., at which place Hawkins assured Pete he could write a letter, with nothing to fear from the manager, Smead, who would keep his own council regarding Pete's name.

True to his prediction, Smead took the news solemnly, and assured both Hawkins and Pete that he would keep his knowledge to himself.

It was well after the hour appointed by Hawkins to begin the journey, when Pete finally emerged with a bulging envelope, addressed and stamped.

"Better not take it to the Post Office," Hawkins advised. "There's sure to be more of those tarnashioned posters there. Here's a boy. Maybe he will take it to the depot and put it right on the train, or do you think he'll recognize the name?"

"No. It's addressed to someone else, to Judge Stivers. The boy will do all right; here, you give it to him."

A moment more, and Pete stood watching the willing messenger go whistling merrily

down the long street toward the depot.

"Isn't it wonderful, to whistle like that," he mused half aloud to Hawkins, but more to himself. "If I could"

He chopped his sentence short and grasped Hawkins by the arm. "Look; those two men; they came out of the alley; they're walking to the depot with him."

Hawkins' eyes followed the trio now disappearing down the street as he remarked:

"I can't be sure, but one of 'em looks like Bull Garret, but he's probably just snooping around. He won't recognize the name on the letter. Let's go."

Pete would have given much to have seen the letter posted, but already he had imposed far too much of his own troubles on his waiting companion, and so he said nothing, but moved off in the direction of the towering mountains of the Saw Tooth Range, walking close at the side of his companion.

Yet, as he walked, he could not forget the letter.

"You noticed I addressed it to Judge Stivers," he explained. "If there's a man on earth who can solve the mystery of that robbery, he can. I've called him Uncle John now for years. Poor old Uncle John! He's worried as much about me, I think, as father has."

"Come, now—you ought to quit worryin',

Pete, just forget it; it's sure to come out all right in the clean up," Hawkins replied, a trifle bored.

Pete sighed heavily, and made a desperate effort to get his train of thoughts into a channel that might prove more interesting to his companion.

"There doesn't seem to be anyone living between here and the mountains at all," he commented, as he noticed the barren waste of snow that stretched in an almost unbroken expanse before him.

"No," Hawkins replied, "when the snow melts in the spring, you will see the reason. The old Salmon River, 'way up by the mountains now, must have been all over here once, for there's nothing but waste sand under this snow. A regular desert in the summer time."

"Someone seems to have gone just ahead of us, though; see the tracks in the snow?"

"Yes," Hawkins replied, "probably some of Jenkins' crew at the pass. That's where I always have trouble. You see the Salmon River Gold Company grabbed that pass where the Gulch Creek empties into the Salmon River, and they could pretty near do as they pleased about letting people through before they took over the claims themselves. I'm about the only one that has an interest up the gulch, outside of themselves now."

For nearly half an hour the two walked on in silence, Pete finding the tramp through the snow exceedingly tiresome, and especially so because of the weight of the pack he carried on his back. As his own fatigue increased he marveled at the strength and endurance of his companion, who never once appeared to be interested in resting.

"Whew!" Pete finally protested, "let's rest; I'm soft, lots softer than I thought I was."

"Ha, ha," the old mountaineer laughed, "I've been waiting for you to say that, but if you had held out much longer, I would have hollered first. All right," he continued, as he threw his pack on the snow, "let's sit on our packs here, awhile, while I tell you how this hole-in-the-ground of mine got its name."

With a sigh of relief, Pete followed the miner's example and lowered his pack to the snow.

"You mean the Dead Horse?" he queried after the first few minutes' rest. "I've been wondering about that."

"Well," Hawkins chuckled, "most of 'em about here have forgotten it. You see, I came into these hills twenty odd years ago, as I've told you. I was a Jim-dandy remittance man then, and wanted to find a gold mine, so I could get back to Australia 'on my own' as we used to say. I hired a couple of guides, good fellows

right enough, but they had no end of fun with me. Whenever they wanted to rest and lay around camp, they'd send me out over a lot of barren ground, picking up rock and digging for gold. One day, we'd just gone up the gulch yonder, and we were all fagged out. It seems they had been there before, and had lost a pack animal, broke its leg or something, and they had buried it right where it fell. Thinking they had a good joke, they fixed it up between them to set me digging into that dead horse's grave. Well, I missed the grave, and dug into what I thought was an indication of ore. Well, to make a long story short, I named her the Dead Horse Mine, right then and there. I quit being a remittance man long ago, but off and on, I've earned enough money to keep after that ore in the old mine for more than twenty years. This winter I think I'll get ore. I've been thinking this way for the last few years, though—can't be certain, of course."

For nearly half an hour Hawkins told Pete of the Dead Horse Mine, becoming so interested in his subject that Pete was actually suffering from the cold.

As Hawkins brought his story to an end, Pete made to start, when Hawkins restrained him.

"We never can make camp out here," he said, indicating the white waste about him.

"I'm getting powerful hungry. Think we had better take a chance, and go by way of the old cabins. No one uses the trail any more, but it's much quicker."

So saying they turned off to the left, and continued in silence.

"Hello," Hawkins suddenly ejaculated, "seems that our friends ahead decided to cut over and take this trail, too. See, there's their tracks again."

Seeing nothing unusual in the matter, Pete made no comment, but trudged silently on.

An hour later the cabins Hawkins referred to loomed into sight.

"Old company houses," Hawkins explained. "Crew that cut Salmon Tooth Pass road lived in 'em. Empty now. We'll stop and make camp there."

Pete was becoming painfully aware of the absence of anything to eat since breakfast. Encouraged now by the promise of food and rest he redoubled his efforts to keep pace with the sturdy miner.

They had come within fifty yards of the nearest hut when Hawkins hesitated and lowered his pack. Pete, still under headway of his new effort to keep up, bumped full into him before he could stop.

"Don't look, somebody's coverin' us with a gun from that house!" Hawkins whispered

hoarsely as he feigned adjustment of straps. "Saw the door open a little. Quick, get your pack down in front of you!" Pete was quick, but his purpose was too evident; as he flattened out in the snow the door of the house burst wide open, and three shots rang out together. Hawkins slumped heavily, hot blood spurting from his left breast into the soft snow. Pete was stunned with the suddenness of the thing, and fairly crushed with horror at what he saw as he prostrated himself beside his fallen comrade.

"I'm—I'm hit—boy—guess they got me—no—use—you—to. Better signal—quits." Hawkins gasped.

Once the full significance of the thing came to him, Pete felt himself torn between a mad impulse to charge the murder house and a more sensible desire to save the life of his friend. A glance at the wound and he knew life or death hung in the balance, and that time was everything. Frantically he sprang to his feet and raised both arms in the air as evidence of surrender.

A loud voice sounded from the open doorway. "All right, we'll come and get ya; hoist 'em high, no dirty work. We got ya covered."

"Keep standing!" the voice ordered. "Where's Hawkins? Get up, Hawkins, or we'll shoot yer burglar friend."

"He's done for, you dirty assassins. He's nearly dead. Shoot me, if you like, but do something for this man, quick!" Pete half shouted and half pleaded the words.

Apparently satisfied, two men with rifles in arms came forward, followed closely by two others.

"Damn fools to put up a fight," the man in front grunted as he indicated the packs, and Hawkins' gun, still clenched in the miner's hand. Pete scrutinized the four sharply. He knew the types, for he had seen gunmen, thugs and gangsters aplenty in San Francisco. Only the clothes, he observed, gave them a different outward appearance from the men who now confronted him.

"Quick, this man's dying. For God's sake, get him into the house!" he pleaded, lowering his arms and bending over the prostrate figure in the snow.

The leader, with sly, rat-like expression, kicked Pete's pack viciously. "Hell," he muttered, "bet he ain't got a drop to drink in there." Then turning to Pete, he thrust his gun menacingly at him and continued: "Don't get in a hurry, you. We know what we're doing, all right. You're worth about five thousand bucks on the hoof and this bird's worth about that much dead. And when it comes to that part of it—you killed him—see?"

Seconds spent in talk seemed like hours to Pete. Helplessly he witnessed Hawkins' life blood ooze! A curse was surely on his head, bitterness gripped his soul! The gunmen beside him seemed to lose their identity; like evil genii they looked, and an insane impulse to spring upon them swept over him!

But the very insanity of the impulse brought cunning with it, as Pete turned to the gunmen and spoke quickly.

"Rats," he began, "know what you've done? You've nearly killed the man that cached the fifty thousand dollars I stole! Here's the only living man that knows where it is!" Pete pointed at the prostrate form on the snow and went on. "Let me dress his wounds. I'll get the pot, and split it with you. Quick, he's going fast."

Alquin, he of the rat face, "Al," the gangsters called him, stepped close to Pete. "If yer lying," he smirked, "we'll frame ya *sure* for murdering this man, and fixin' the hole in him won't make him live either. If yer talkin' straight the deal sounds fair enough. Bring the Gopher in, fellows, no hurry anyhow, Bull can't get here for hours yet."

"Hurry then, for God's sake, hurry!" Pete shouted, as he grabbed his pack and rushed wildly for the cabin.

"Bed—quick," he ordered on gaining an

entrance. Frantically he tore open his pack and snatched the small medicine kit that Smead had included in his list of supplies. Then he made for the bed upon which Hawkins was laid by the four men who carried him in.

Only the sub-conscious mind of the one-time medical student seemed functioning as Pete hung over the prostrate body of his friend and probed deep into the left lung for the assassin's bullet.

Even the huddled group of gangsters, some nervous and restless in the presence of their crime, marveled at the phenomenal skill with which he worked.

Alguin alone, as he played an electric flash at Pete's command, seemed interested, for mercenary reasons only.

At the end of an hour Pete straightened and breathed heavily.

"Can't see what *you* frisk safes for, when you can do that." Alguin spoke for the first time.

If Pete heard him, he made no sign, as tenderly he looked again under the eyelids of the helpless Hawkins. "I've done all a human can," he muttered. "God only can do the rest, and God doesn't seem to be working." Then he sank to his knees beside the bed.

How long he lay there he did not know, but when he again opened his eyes, kerosene lights

were burning in another room, and a fire was crackling somewhere in an open hearth. He was not in a one-room shack, he noticed, but rather in one room of a combination of three or four. Pete, however, paid little attention to the room, as he hung breathlessly over the form of his patient, observing his breathing and pulse beats. At length, convinced that he had done all that lay within his power for the wounded man, he slumped again to his knees by the bed.

Presently he heard someone brush through the door, and approach the bedside, but he did not look up as his throbbing head had again sought refuge between his folded arms. A strange voice roused him.

"I've brought you some supper, Mr. Alden, and some clean bandages and water. You are a splendid surgeon."

Pete rubbed his eyes in astonishment. A woman or a girl, he could not be sure in the dim light, stood beside him.

"Am I crazy, or am I sight-seeing again on the Barbary Coast?" he rasped through his teeth. What effect the bitter insinuation had, he could not see, and would not if he could. He was in a gangster's den, and only one kind of a woman could be there. He waited a moment for his answer, but the woman had left, leaving a small tray of food, a pitcher of hot

water and a small roll of clean white strips on an empty soap box by the bedside.

The sight of the bandages caused the operation of a few hours before to flash back through Pete's mind. There *had* been a nurse there, it seemed, someone who knew just what he wanted. He remembered her faintly. He could not be sure; his brain could not be trusted. First stupefied with whiskey, eating only once in twenty-four hours, witnessing himself placarded as a thief; invited to freedom by a man of his own heart, only, so it seemed, to be the cause of that same friend's now lying at the point of death, was far too much for one human being to endure. It was little wonder he could not trust his brain. Aside from his mental collapse, he was completely exhausted by his hard tramp through the snow, and the strenuous super-human effort necessary to steel his nerves for the operation. He gave up entirely now and slumped heavily forward, letting his delirious head nestle softly against the prostrate body of Hawkins.

But torture followed him, even to this pitifully fitful sleep. He was caught fast in the bogs of a swamp it seemed to his fevered brain. Vainly he sought to rise, but human monsters, dancing devils with long red knives, thrust him back. He called for help but no one came, until at length his father drifted in

on the scene. Pleadingly Peter held up his hands, and his father bent over to grasp them. Yet even before their hands met, a dwarf stole up and whispered in his father's ear: "He isn't your son, he's a thief, a common thief, don't touch him!"

Then many little dwarfs tugged and pulled until his father went away. Peter, heart broken, begged the devils to kill him, and he waited for the blow. But no, even as he begged to die, a strong man came up and brushed his tormentors aside and with one pull had him half out of the mire. Then the biggest dwarf of all let fly a huge spear straight at him. His rescuer stood in the way and was struck. Pete felt the hands that held his grow cold and weak. In agony he tried to help, to do something, but his feet were still in the bog, and he could do nothing, until finally an angel floated down and poured something into the dying man's mouth, and as she did so, the man grew instantly stronger, his fingers closing once more on Pete's trembling hands. Pete looked up in gratitude, and the angel smiled at him! Pete, with new hope in his heart, moved his knees and found he could help himself a little when the angel smiled. She seemed to bathe his burning head with cold water and even kissed his parched lips as she smiled. Even as she did so, the dying man looked on, smiled faintly and said

he could live. With a sigh, Pete rested his head on soft green grass that somehow took the place of the swamp. He stretched his aching limbs luxuriously and slept, the sweet sleep of a man kissed in his dreams by a beautiful woman.

* * * *

Sunshine, flooding full in his face, greeted Pete as he reluctantly opened his eyes for a moment to stare vacantly about. Almost at once his eyes rested on the drawn form of Hawkins, and the scene of the night before with all of its horror, came back to him. He had slept long and forsaken his wounded friend! With a startled cry he sprang up from a mattress on the floor and made for the wounded man's bedside! As he did so a form bending over the sick bed turned and faced him. Steel-blue eyes that wanted to be merry, but obviously under stern restraint, met his, and he stopped as though facing an apparition. Was he still dreaming? Cold words shattered his doubts. "I see you are up, Mr. Alden. Your patient passed the crisis at midnight. I will leave now." The girl, so vividly young, yet drawn with care, turned to go.

Peter wheeled confusedly from a mad rush to the sick bed, to detain the fair apparition a moment longer. "Wait, Angel. I mean, am I dreaming? *Who* are you; *why* are you here?"

The girl raised her hand for silence. "There may be burglars on the Barbary Coast," her words were eloquent with fine sarcasm, "but certainly there are no angels there!" So saying, she closed the door softly behind her.

Stunned by the rebuke, Pete recalled his words of the night before. Nothing mattered now, however, but the life of Hawkins, and he turned and softly tiptoed to the bedside.

Hawkins breathed evenly and well. His eyes opened for a moment and rested on Peter.

"Well, boy, I've been—there—and back," he gasped slowly and with great effort, then relapsed into life-giving slumber.

Pete, greatly refreshed by his sleep and still dwelling on the soul-satisfying dreams he had had, pulled a chair to the window, and looked out into the sunshine. A heavily armed man sat beside a fire directly in front of the window. Clicking of poker chips and occasional loud voices assailed his ears from the adjoining rooms. The scene of the near murder, trampled snow, and the trail of blood still bore mute witness to the agonies of the day before, and he shifted his gaze to the sick bed. Realizing that his friend was being nursed back to life, only in all probability to be foully murdered later on, for some unknown reason, sat badly with the mountain sunshine and snow without. He remembered the fifty thousand

dollars, hiding, so his captors thought, in the mountains. Realization of his own hopeless position, soon to be arrested as he was, and in all probability for the murder of his friend also if the plan of the gangsters was carried out, flashed through his mind. Nevertheless, even these thoughts failed somehow to strike terror to his heart. Instead, green fields and laughing blue eyes danced before him. Who was she? One of the gangster's wives, perhaps. Yes,—undoubtedly, yet what would have happened to Hawkins without her? He looked fondly into the face of the sleeping man. Did she only nurse him because she too had heard of the fifty thousand dollars? But certainly, why else? Was she not one of the gangsters, living in the same house with them? His lips curled bitterly. What wouldn't a woman stoop to? If she only didn't look so much like the angel of his dream! Peter sighed and looked once more through the window.

A sudden start brought him to his feet and he pressed close to the glass. The figure of a man coming up the trail seemed to blot out the sunshine and drag the swamp of Pete's dreams along with him toward the house. Pete thought back, then like a flash he remembered him. It was Buller Garret! The man he drank with at the Gold Nugget Saloon. A feeling of relief came over him, only instantly to

leave him as he thought of the letter to his father. It was Buller who talked to the boy who carried the letter for San Francisco!

As the man approached the door, a feminine voice greeted him.

"Good morning, Buller," it rang out—"Buller," she called him Buller! Pete winced, as the voice went on: "We've been expecting you all night long. Got your Mr. Burglar all right."

The two were inside the house now and Pete found it necessary to step lightly to the door to follow the conversation. She was still talking. "But why did they shoot this poor mountaineer? Is that part of the plan, too?" Pete heard her ask.

"Then, he's dead?" Buller seemed suddenly elated.

"No," she answered, "he's still alive."

"Hell. Get me Al, hurry up."

As Buller thus spoke to the girl Pete stirred uneasily. How dare the brute order her about so! As he asked himself this question, he heard the approach of a man followed by angry words from Bull.

"What's this, Al, Hawkins ain't bumped?"

"We're bumpin' fer money, ain't we?" Alguin retorted.

"There ya go agin, always belly-achin' fer cash. Ain't ya allus got yer dough?"

"Sure, but we're collectin' *this* time fer keepin' 'em alive. Listen," (Alguin got confidential) "the dip in there slips this Hawkins bloke the wad, fifty thousand bucks; he caches it in the hills, jigs up and they go after it, see? Hawkins, when his pipes er workin' again, tips us where the sugar lays; blooey, we cash in all around, get me?"

"Gotja," Buller grunted. "Where they at?"

Pete heard footsteps coming toward the door as he quickly regained his chair by the window. The door opened.

"So, we meets again, Mr. Peter Alden, J-A-R." Bull's words had a sickening purr to them, as he greeted his glowering prisoner.

Pete snapped quickly up from his chair, his full six feet towering even larger in his corduroy breeches and thick flannel shirt. With stubborn hair breaking clean from a massive forehead, high cheek bones, jaws squared, his mouth narrowed to a slit, Pete looked anything but the crestfallen, despondent drunkard Buller remembered. For a moment the gangster hesitated, then continued his purring. "Feelin' cocky for a burglar guy, ain't ya?" His shifty eyes took in the entire room at a glance. A soft fluffy handkerchief caught his eye, and his face flushed instantly as he continued talking. "Maybe my little Missus' been feedin'

ya too good. No hard feelin's though, seein's how yer not stayin' long. Sit down."

Pete huddled himself on the window-sill and looked out, while Bull calmly rolled a yellow cigarette. Observing the cigarette, Pete looked from Bull to the sick bed. If Bull got the significance of the look, he ignored it, and before he could apply a match, Pete's long right arm shot out like a flash, grasping rat-tail mustache, hand-made cigarette and all in a vice-like grip. With a grinding jerk he threw the cigarette to the floor and ground it under his heel.

"Rat! There's a *man* over there, sick. *You* make the air rotten enough without lighting up!"

Bull, white with rage, sprang back, reaching for the gun on his hip, but Pete, with legs wide apart, and hands on hips, sneered sarcastically: "Dog, you *can't* shoot, got to be dark for you to work!"

Bull's fingers twitched nervously at the holster, yet he hesitated. As he stood thus, a cunning gleam came into his eyes. "Kinda nasty this mornin' ain't ya?—guess I'll write yer old man an' tell 'im as how yer all grown up now in man's clothes." Bull followed his words by pulling a letter from his pocket, which Pete recognized at once as the one he himself had written. Bull continued: "This

thing don't read much like a *man* wrote it though, think I kin add some news to it. I'm comin' in agin," he continued, his voice lowered almost to a snarl, "an when I do, ya'd better be a little polite, if ya expect to see papa agin'." Then the door closed behind him, followed instantly by the rattle of dishes on a tray, and a woman's voice saying: "Oh, I beg your pardon, Buller. I was just taking in something to eat."

"Well, don't, and yer not goin' in there any more. That goes! Here, Al, throw this chuck at 'em."

If Buller could have witnessed the flash of color in Pete's white face, as he listened to the words, he might not have waited long for his next visit to the sick room. Alguin obediently shoved the door open, and placed a crude tin tray of food on the floor. "Bring that junk," he ordered, indicating the two basins of crimson water beneath the sick bed.

Pete did as ordered and followed Alguin out, passing down a short hallway into what proved to be a sort of washroom, once used by laborers. He lingered in this room, and on the way back, as long as possible, but for some reason or other the house seemed deserted and only Alguin, the sick man and himself remained of the considerable group who had been there during the night.

After feeding hot broth to Hawkins and smoothing as best he could the coarse pillows of the bed, he plunged hungrily into his own plate of fat sandwiches, washing great mouthfuls down with hot coffee. In spite of the hectic shape his affairs had taken, he was surprised to find that he still had a semblance of the buoyancy of spirit that had come to him as he told his story to Hawkins. Even the stealing of his letter home failed to kill it. Perhaps it came with the knowledge that Hawkins had passed the crisis. He would not face another one! Pete swore as he started a savage bite. The bite ended abruptly, however, as his teeth brought up sharply against something in the sandwich decidedly unbitable. Curiously Pete pried the slices of bread apart and peered between. Then he started eating as calmly as possible at another corner! With pounding heart he looked stealthily about, to see if he was observed. At length, feeling certain he was secure, he slipped from between the slices of bread, a snugly folded bit of brown paper and read:

"Hawkins cached the fifty thousand dollars you stole back of Jumbo Point, ten paces due East discovery stake old Cherry Blossom Claims. Destroy this. Tam."

For a moment Pete gazed, as though fascinated, at the paper. Footsteps approached his door, and someone seemed about to enter. With

a quick movement he shoved the note, remainder of the sandwich and all into his mouth, washing them down with coffee, before he turned and faced the door.

Four men, three of whom Pete recognized, entered. Buller came first, with Alguin and his mate of the day before following, but the fourth man was a stranger to Pete. As they closed the door behind them Pete observed that Bull's bravery seemed to increase with the size of his gang.

"Now, we're talkin' business," he smirked, "and we won't git rough unless papa's boy needs a spankin'." All but the fourth man of the gangsters joined in loud guffaws. At the noise Pete observed Hawkins' eyes open and then close quickly. "Kin yer mountain gopher talk yet?" pursued Bull, indicating the bed.

"No." Pete spoke as much to Hawkins as to the gangsters. "A dozen words and his lungs will flood with blood and that'll make *you* murderers."

"Yer not talking 'bout *us*," snapped Alguin. "Yer the murderer; four men an' a lady saw ya do it, an' 'ud swear to it!"

"Well," Bull interrupted, "he'd better be talkin' by tonight, blood or no blood. We're runnin' just criss-cross to orders. You'd oughta be takin' a nice long ride now, and yer gopher friend ought to be pushin' up lilies. Yer too

valuable stock to have sittin' purty out here in the open. I holds that a deal's a deal. I'm fer going straight ahead with the program. But little Phil, here," Bull nodded his head toward Alguin, "says yer offerin' a new deal. How about it?" Before Pete could answer, Buller's eyes swept the room, stopped in front of the bed and flashed back to Pete. "Jest a minute, you. Stick up yer dukes, I'm lookin' fer a little dry-goods."

Buller ripped open the flap of Pete's left pocket and with a smile, more like a snarl, extracted a lady's handkerchief. As though what he had found confirmed a growing suspicion, he turned on Alguin and said determinedly: "I'm tellin' ya again, Phil, this is bad business. Orders is orders. If old J. D. finds out we're crossin' him it's Deer Lodge fer us." Pete, looking anxiously toward the bed, thought he saw Hawkins' face twitch a little at this speech.

Little Phil replied: "Well, ya asked him for his deal, didn't you? Let's have it."

Buller registered half-defiance and half-agreement, but said nothing, as he indicated that Pete should explain his offer.

"Well," Pete began, "there's a little matter of fifty thousand dollars, that I'm not caring a hell of a lot about, seeing how things are. You can have it if you play the game."

"Where is it?" asked Buller, plainly suspicious.

"Used to be in a safe," Pete bantered.

"Don't get funny," Buller threatened, "where's it now?"

"That's *my* game." Pete's new manner was baffling.

"Just supposing for a minute there is fifty thousand dollars in one place in the world, *what's* yer game?" Buller demanded, as though determined to go through with the talk for Alguin's sake, though Pete was certain his fate was already fixed in the leader's mind.

"Just what I named to your nice little murderer over there," Pete replied, motioning toward Alguin. "Wait 'till Hawkins here can talk, then let me lead you to the cache; you forget me and the stuff's yours. Fair enough, isn't it?"

"Now, then, yer *talkin'* purty," Buller retorted. "But, it don't go. We got to *know* where it is, and what if there *ain't* fifty thousand dollars, or any dollars?"

"Well, you've still got us, if it isn't, haven't you?" Pete asked.

"That's *one* thing ya said right," Buller replied, and his expression left no doubt of its sinister meaning in Pete's mind. Turning to his companions, Buller advised 'holding a meet-in' ' on the subject, and finally led the men out

of the room, but not until he had warned Pete to have his sick friend talking by night.

The strain of the thing was beginning to tell on Pete. Even his new fighting spirit failed to come to his rescue as he took stock of the situation, pacing, as he did so, back and forth in the room.

Outside, the sun continued shining as brightly as ever. A bird even had the temerity to hop up on his very window-sill, and peer saucily in, and as Pete watched it peck about for a moment or so and then flit merrily away, the strangeness of his situation came to him in a new light. Here was a handful of men, and a woman, thrown together entirely by circumstances. Yet one of the men, a simple, clean man of the hills, was lying at the point of death, and a woman, lovely to behold, a veritable angel among devils it seemed, yet withal was among them! "Four men and a lady saw you kill him." Alguin's words mocked and jeered as Pete thought of the woman. It was easy for him to visualize crime in crowded slums of great cities, but here it seemed wholly unnatural and awful. If there was a God anywhere, surely the glistening white mountains, dark mysterious canyons, snow-covered forests and frozen streams should know him! Yet in all his checkered career Peter could not recall a scene so foul as the shooting of Hawkins, or a plot

so dastardly as the one in which he was the principal actor. What was the answer to it all? A dozen times he asked himself the question. What were Buller Garret's mysterious orders? And the girl, Tam; why had she written him the note?

The scene shifted to Frisco, to the home of his father. How he must feel, seeing his only son, apple of his eye, placarded as a common burglar! And no denial of the accusation to soothe his tortured heart! But all this was past and gone, still raw and sore to be sure, but an old wound, nevertheless, compared with the ominous hours ahead. He walked over to Hawkins and tenderly held his still hands. He felt the pulses, and noted that they were weak, but persistent. Given half a chance, the sturdy mountaineer could soon demand an accounting of his enemies, Pete assured himself.

While Pete stood thus, Hawkins opened his eyes and smiled. Not the weak smile of a sick man, but the confident smile of a man who never loses, be the odds against him what they may. He motioned a desire to talk, and Pete leaned closely to listen.

"Heard 'em," he whispered. "Company trick—want Dead Horse Mine—not you. They'll try to bump me again."

"Did you hear about the fifty thousand

you're supposed to have cached for me?" Pete asked anxiously.

"Yes."

"You're supposed to say it's back of Jumbo Point, ten paces due east discovery stake, Cherry Blossom Claim," Pete spoke softly, watching both the door and window for possible eavesdroppers.

"Hell of a place!" As Hawkins spoke he would have chuckled over the words, but his face contracted in pain, and he patted Pete's hand instead. A moment later he resumed. "Take a week to get there; I'll be fighting then."

"No, you won't, not for a month. I'm doing the fighting for both of us; you're going to get better first, and that will take a long time."

"Goin' to fight, just the same," Hawkins continued, undaunted. "With my *brains*, not my guns. Got a trick or two myself, just you get me out of here and play easy till I lead." Pete hung over the words, not certain if his patient knew the full plot against them, and wondering if he should tell him all he knew. Hawkins' lips moved again. "Company gun crew all here," he muttered, waving feeble arms about, "who else?"

"A woman—lady—girl."

"Three of 'em?" Hawkins raised his brow.

"No, only one."

"Name?"

"Tam, that's all I know," Pete replied.

"Tamarack Susie, gun crew's brains." Hawkins shook his finger warningly in Pete's puzzled face. "She's" Hawkins wanted to say more but his throat rattled, and a fleck of blood colored his white lips.

Pete, thoroughly alarmed, spoke sharply, "Stop, not another word, keep still!" he ordered, and hurriedly bathed the man's lips, propped him higher on the pillow and listened anxiously at the rattling chest for the dreaded hemorrhage. At the end of a minute he sighed in relief and again took his seat by the bedside.

Hour after hour he sat there, now intently watching the calm face of the heroic Hawkins, battling silently against heavy odds as he was, and now gazing far out into the mountains, watching the setting sun polish to a glistening finish hard white ridges of the mountains.

"Somewhere out there," he told himself, "Peter Alden, Jr., is going to learn something."

With darkness came blustering wind, howling mournfully about the cabin, shaking windows and blowing puffs of drifted snow in fine frozen grains through the tiny cracks. The air was freezing cold, and Peter feared for Hawkins. Already he had added his own fur

coat to the meager covering, and now stood beating his arms about to keep his blood running hot. It was a losing fight, and Pete cursed bitterly. Time and again he tried the door, but it was always locked. Outside the guard huddled close under a hastily-thrown-up shelter where a fire glowed red in the blackness made weird by blowing snow. The house was certainly deserted, Pete thought, but even fiends might send to their victims heat, a light and food. Buller must have won his point and already the gangsters were probably on the way to Moapa for the sheriff. At the thought Pete's jaws bulged and his eyes narrowed to slits. Hawkins, a tie that held him there more securely than forty iron chains, could give life-saving advice, if he dared let him talk, but it was no use, and he turned again and looked at the fire in the yard. As he did so, four men, crouching low against the wind, crossed the path of lurid light and made for the cabin. A heavy key rasped in the door, and men stamping snow from coarse boots came in. A moment more, and Pete heard the crackling of kindling wood in the hearth. Then his own door was thrown open and Buller Garret, kerosene lamp in hand, entered, his gloating smile appearing grotesque in the sudden light of the room.

"Feelin' nice and polite, tonight, Peter J-A-R?" he asked, as he placed the light on the

soap box in the corner. Without waiting for an answer he retraced his steps, leaving the door wide open. Pete was genuinely grateful for the warm air that swept in, but above all for the opportunity to see Bull's company. He was relieved to observe the same faces he had seen with Buller before.

Some one was preparing a meal and the aroma of coffee coupled with the sound of crackling fire revived his spirits.

A half hour later he was again feeding broth to Hawkins, eyeing the while a huge portion of beef, broiled to a char, which had been sent in for himself. Nothing feminine about the meal, Pete mused between huge bites, as he thought of the sandwiches. Even the coffee now was unusually strong and black and without sugar.

The meal finished, Pete was ordered to join the circle about the fire. Tenderly he tucked covering about the sick man, and stepped out to join the circle of gangsters, expecting to be told the course of action that had undoubtedly been agreed upon. As Pete came into the room, he heard words pass. Little Phil Alguin was talking earnestly to Bull.

" and better lay it to 'im jes as she figgered it, eh, Buller?"

Pete's presence stopped an answer.

"Any objection to lightin' up?" Buller smirked as Pete took a seat.

"Not out here," Pete replied, now as before finding it impossible even to feign sociability with Buller Garret. With an effort he relaxed into a less hostile mood, and tried to smile. Buller took his changed manner as evidence of a partial victory and continued:

"Old Gopher in there talkin' yet?"

"He did, and it nearly killed him," Pete answered simply.

"Talk location stuff?"

"Yes."

"Where is it?" It was plain Buller thought Pete was lying.

"It *used* to be in a safe."

"Still cocky, huh?" Buller's face darkened.

"Give 'em the dope, don't get to fightin' again," interrupted Alguin, impatiently.

"Well, yer damn lucky to be sittin' there," Buller continued. "Don't mind tellin' ya what's what. Order is, old Gopher in there's got to be croaked. That's worth more than cash to me. I ain't allus been free an' loose-like myself, an' he knows it. Then there's you. Yer worth five thousand berries, in jail. More'n that, we could fasten old Gopher's bumpin' onto you easier'n hell, and that's that. Now afore I gets here, you up and talks fifty thousand cash to my pals, and they falls for it

hard. Personally, don't mind sayin' I think yer a liar. But I can't play my hunch against all the boys here, so we had a meetin'. I'm tellin' ya all this, so you won't go figgerin' crossways later, see? Well, we had a meetin' and here's the dope: First off, Hawkins' gotta go. We ain't sayin' what's happened to him, he's jest takin' a little trip. You're stayin' right here. Slim over there goes after your cash. If he gets it, you can burn up snow from here to hell, if you want to, I don't care. If he don't find it, well, there'll be a nice little necktie party for bumpin' Hawkins. Somebody's got to be the goat, you know, an' anyhow," Bull saw his error and hurried on, "the boys here all say you got the dope on the cash from Hawkins and bumped him. That bein' the case, you'd oughta be damn grateful that we're not turnin' ya over." Buller finished his long speech with an air of finality.

"How do I know you won't finish Hawkins just as soon as I tell you where the cache is?" Pete asked carelessly.

"How do *we* know you ain't double-crossin' us on where the long green's reposin'?" countered Buller.

"You have my word."

"Yeh, an' that's a hell of a lot, ain't it?" scoffed Bull. "An' you've got my word the old

Gopher won't be bumped if yer telling the truth."

"Then, what will you do with him? Why not leave him here?"

"Now, yer askin' questions that ya don't have no concern in at all. An' now that we've talked to ya like genelmen, what's the answer?"

Under such circumstances one with half the astuteness of an Alden could have answered the question at once. Pete knew the game was up; he would be glad to have the few days' respite afforded by the hunt for the mythical fifty thousand, of course. But Hawkins' words flashed through his mind. "Tamarack Susie, brains of the gun crew," he had said. And she, the brains of the gun crew, had given him the location of the cache! Was it a trick? When sober, Pete seldom lost at playing poker. Now he studied the stern, crafty faces about him. If they knew *she* had sent him the Jumbo Point location and heard him name it now, they would know he lied, and he could expect no mercy at their hands. The Company's game, whatever it was, called for Hawkins' life. Pete knew the men before him cared nothing for murder. He knew the system they represented, for he had often heard his father tell how escaped criminals, men with death penalties over their

heads, often entered criminal service for designing men of affairs, and he knew that these criminals had little chance of escaping the clutches once they entered such service. But why had *Tam* written the note? Hawkins' warning finger, and the gurgle of blood in the miner's throat, flashed back to Peter. Eight eyes, all searching for the slightest hint of deception, were focused upon him. Still he hesitated. His lips were dry, but he dared not moisten them. Then Hawkins' voice vanished and his warning finger faded from Pete's mind. In its place came flooding in the dream of the night before, and he saw again the angel-girl pouring water between the parched lips of Hawkins! There could be no mistake, the angel was surely Tamarack Sue!

Pete's face broke into a smile. Almost enthusiastically he slapped his knee and exclaimed: "You mean, then, that for this stinking fifty thousand, you'll let me go free *and* you won't bump Hawkins?"

Buller was plainly surprised and taken aback by Pete's evident certainty of the money. Nevertheless he answered steadily:

"That's our game, where's the money?"

"Jumbo Point, ten paces due East of the discovery stake of Cherry Blossom Claim." Like a poker player with his all on the board

before him, Peter dealt the words and waited tensely for the answer.

With a triumphant smile Alguin slapped Buller on the shoulder. "Then, she's right again, what'd I tell you?"

Even Slim Eliot, dark-skinned and quiet, the runner who Pete knew could bring back only a sentence of death, seemed to be unusually pleased.

"Let's figure the cut," someone suggested. All but Buller seemed to consider the money as good as in their hands.

Pete's momentary triumph was short-lived. Buller faced him and slowly drew from his pocket a small crumpled handkerchief. Pulling it meditatively through his fingers, he caught Pete's eye and muttered:

"Sumthin' queer about all this, sumthin' damn funny. Eliot starts in the morning. Hawkins'll be leavin' tonight."

* * * *

CHAPTER VI

PETE had no opportunity to be alone with Hawkins again that night. He had hardly finished naming the location of the money, in fact, before preparations were made for the removal of the wounded man. A deep wagon box, once used for hauling gravel, but now resting on crude runners, was backed up to the door. Although fully a foot of straw covered the bottom, he insisted on placing his own mattress on top of it, declaring to the gangsters that even the slightest bump might mean death for his friend.

Tears of grief flooded his eyes as he tenderly dressed once more the jagged hole made by Alguin's bullet. The rough sled loomed horribly like a coffin in the semi-darkness of the doorway, as with choking voice he uttered words of hope and encouragement, tucked his heavy fur coat over the form and placed a hard pillow beneath the grizzled head. Hawkins was wide awake and apparently aware of the meaning of his trip, yet he said no word. For a moment their eyes met, eyes of two strong men sorely pressed, saying to each other: "'Till we meet again."

Slim Eliot cracked a whip; the sled moved

out into the night, and the door, as though begrudging even the pitifully weak light that streamed out, slammed shut.

With black despair in his heart, Pete ignored an invitation to sit by the fire and went to his room. He tried to think clearly, to form a plan, but nothing came to him. The air seemed oppressive, and the room changed its aspect from a dungeon vault to a huge square sepulchre, made sacred by the blood of Brud Hawkins. He seemed still to look into the eyes that said: "You are my pardner, and it's your lead." As Pete dwelt on the thought he fervently raised his eyes toward heaven, clenched his fists and made a vow: "Pardner, I'm not holding many cards right now, but such as I have, by God, I'm going to play!"

With his solemn oath came a new zeal that sent blood tingling through his veins, as he nervously paced the room, pausing each time like a caged panther to gaze menacingly out at the gangsters before the fire. Whiskey and cards absorbed the attention of all save Buller, who alone sat facing his door and did not drink.

Questions criss-crossed constructive thoughts, as he tried to make a plan. Why had Tam written the note? Why had Hawkins warned him against her? He had Hawkins' own words as a partial answer to this, anyway

—"Company trick, want Dead Horse Mine," he had whispered. Why they wanted it, he did not know. He remembered Hawkins saying he hadn't struck anything there. Even if he had, why did they resort to murder? As he pondered this in his mind, his answer, in the shape of Buller Garret, looked straight at him from behind the gambling table. Putting together little scraps of what he had heard, Pete came to the conclusion that Hawkins must in some way have been crossing these very gangsters. Buller, at any rate. Probably the Company knew of it, and used their knowledge to get rid of the miner. Carefully Pete checked up the details of the past five days. He remembered that a crew was due to join Hawkins and himself at the mine. Just when or where he knew not. If only he could have talked with Hawkins more!

Pete recalled the words spoken before the fireplace by Alguin. After all, Tam, the girl of mystery, must have laid out the program that took Hawkins away! Even so he could not believe that Tamarack Sue, "Tam," she had signed her name, belonged to the gangsters. No, never! He felt morally certain he could count upon her help, in spite of the mass of conflicting evidence.

But what to do? Whenever he reached

that point, he seemed face to face with a sheer cliff of granite. He must get word to the outer world, but how? How? How? He thought of officers at Moapa. "Lots of strangers in town, company men, mostly in public offices." The words of Hawkins flew back to him. How much, after all, this man of the hills had said in so few hours! No wonder he was a thorn in the side of some.

Pete threw himself heavily across the empty bed, and ran nervous fingers through badly tangled hair. A second there and he nervously plunged his fist deep into the mattress beneath him and whirled again to his feet.

Outside the wind had died down, he noticed, its howling reduced to only occasional moans. He went to the window. The guard's fire was now a bed of coals and two men sat beside it. They seemed unusually alert, Pete thought, and their bearing reminded him of what he had heard of prison camps in frozen Siberia.

A light far up on the mountainside attracted his attention. Someone was signalling, it seemed, as three times the lantern, or whatever it was, swayed in a wide arc and disappeared. A minute later and the signal was repeated. A vague feeling, perhaps only a forlorn hope inspired by dire want caused Pete to

block as much of the window as he could. Not satisfied with the experiment, he unbuttoned his flannel shirt and held it like a bat's wings over the square pane of glass. Three times he moved quickly aside, then stood still and waited, hardly daring to hope for an answer. Suddenly the light reappeared, repeated three swings, and disappeared. Fearing to raise false hopes within him, Pete was still unwilling to be convinced. He waited a full two minutes, then allowed one flash only to pass through the window. The answer came back, one flash. Still not satisfied, he allowed a longer interval of darkness, then flapped his shirt wings for five distinct signals. Eagerly he pressed against the pane of glass, for this must be his last signal! The guards had changed their positions and were facing him now. Seconds flew past, and then minutes, it seemed. In the outer room he heard signs of the game breaking up. Would the answer come? He had been at the window too long already, his silence must have made Buller suspicious! He began buttoning his shirt, and gave a last intent look into the darkness. There it was! With pounding heart he counted the swings, one-two-three-four-five! Then darkness. They were meant for him, there could be no doubt of it now! But who had sent them? What did they mean? At any rate, whatever they meant, he was not

alone against his enemies! But after all, who could have sent them to him if not Tam or Hawkins? And it would be many weeks before Hawkins could wave a lantern on a cold winter night. Tam, then! This mystery girl still playing a double role! Pete sauntered to the door and looked out. Buller sat alone at the table gazing fixedly toward Peter. He beckoned to Pete now to come to the table, and as he watched him approach, he ran his hand nervously over his stringy hair.

"Jes' in case ya might fergit it," he began, "yer not expected to leave. In case ya do," he continued, "yer gonna be plugged, and the first crooked work from the outside, even if ya don't try to get away, means *you've* bumped Hawkins."

"That all?" Pete was becoming tired of the same harangue from Buller.

"No, I want to know somethin'."

"Well?"

"How long was Tamarack in that room with you?"

"Only to help dress Hawkins' wound, so far as I know."

"An' did you lug her mattress in there?"

"No."

"Did Hawkins talk to her?"

"No."

"Then, how did she know"—Buller caught himself, as though he had spoken words intended to be concealed.

"How did she know what?" Peter demanded.

To evade or refuse to answer, would be to show fear. That was exactly what Buller did not want, especially since, for some unaccountable reason, he did fear the man before him.

"How did she know where Hawkins cached the wad?" Buller blurted.

"Perhaps you'd better ask *her*. That's what *I* would have to do."

"Maybe she *doesn't* know," Bull blustered, his eyes studying Pete's expression, "and anyhow, Slim's already on the way. This thing's gettin' on my nerves."

"Don't know why you're so dead set against me," Pete started on a new tack, hoping against hope that something might develop.

"Oh, yes ya do, yer a wise 'un, all right; Gopher an' you goin' to frame me, huh? Not Buller Garret. Oh, don't try to look ignorant," he went on, observing Pete's mystified expression. "I'm on to you, 'way ahead o' you. 'Tain't the first time that old mountain goat's been tryin' to fasten sumpin' onto *me*—if I thought he was talkin'," Buller's face clouded, as a new thought apparently entered his head. "Well, we wouldn't wait fer the five thousand

they're givin' fer you. That's more'n likely the bunk, too, seein' yer from Frisco. Guys with an old man fer a banker don't act like you; looks queer to me. Shouldn't a let him go to her," Bull seemed talking to himself now. "He'll be speakin' all he knows afore the sun comes up."

The two gangsters came back into the room dragging straw mattresses behind them. Pete, seeing that Buller was apparently through talking, went again to his room. For fully five minutes he gazed intently toward the mountains. The light did not reappear. Whatever the significance, he knew it did not beckon him to come to it. That something favorable was brewing in the hills from whence it came he had no doubt, but just what his part in what was to happen would be, he could not imagine.

Pete had profited much by his short talk with Buller, the escaped convict as Pete had set him down to be. He was undoubtedly from San Francisco, judging by his reference to the place, Pete mused—probably one of the many criminals who seem to be satisfied to live in crime, so long as they escape its consequence, until by some freak chance they cross the path of a woman, who fans into a frenzy their desire to live, and exaggerates the chances of capture. Buller and Tam meant something to each other, of that Pete felt certain. He had seen what

the influence of a good woman had done for men before. In some, it had awakened slumbering conscience, lifting them from paths of degeneracy to useful lives. But in these men, the soul of life had always been there, it had only slept. Buller Garret was different. Steeped in slimy, wilful crime, he had long ago lost the spark of manhood, if he had ever had it. Tamarack Sue then, must have merely inflamed the animal passion within him that craved life, and exaggerated the chances of losing it. This, surely, accounted for his suspicions of Hawkins, and some one exceedingly clever knew how to use this suspicion.

As he went over the details of his conclusions, Pete paused at the door and looked once more at Buller, as though to confirm his judgment. While Alguin and his companions arranged mattresses for the night, Buller kept his seat, nervously stacking and re-stacking little piles of poker chips. Seeing Pete in the doorway he reached for a new package of playing cards and, as though to demonstrate his unconcern, he broke it open and laid out a hand of solitaire. Pete observed how Buller's greasy fingers, some nearly black from fixing the wood fire behind him, smudged the glossy white of the cards.

The mind of man is his greatest ally when serious danger seems near, and now as Pete

gazed at the cards before Buller, a plan, certain and definite, formed itself as though by magic. Striding rapidly forward he asked permission to go to the wash-room. As he passed he noticed how Garret sat directly in front of the fire and always seemed cold. He observed that he had even had his mattress laid out as close to the fire as the table would permit. He stumbled slightly over this mattress as he crossed the room. As he returned he retraced his steps carefully, and this time stumbling heavily over the mattress, plunged headlong into the table. The impact sent the table crashing over almost to the burning edge of the logs and in the general confusion that followed, Pete worked fast. Deftly he snatched several playing cards from the floor and jammed them deep into his pocket; others he pitched into the fire. All this required but the work of a second. Regaining his feet he found himself looking into the muzzles of three revolvers as he stammered an apology.

"Ya might not a meant it, but don't do it again. Better go get locked up now." Buller emphasized his words by waving his gun toward Pete's door.

Elated at his initial success, Pete entered his room and heard the heavy lock close behind him. He listened a moment, and heard one of the gangsters drag a mattress to the door. They

were certainly taking no chances, Pete mused, as he shifted the box that held the lamp to the bedside, and cautiously pulled a card from his pocket. Even with his naked eye he could make out the print of Buller's thumb. He counted the cards, and found he had five of them! Two he hid carefully in his boot top, and one beneath his mattress; but the two that seemed to show the best prints, he wrapped carefully in bits of old paper and returned to his pockets. So far his plan had worked excellently, but it is one thing to have a sudden inspiration, quite another to nurse it along against seeming impossibilities. So thought Pete, as he studied long and hard on the next step.

He thought of the light on the hill. It certainly meant something! Perhaps a message would come to him during the night. That was it! The signal was to put him on his guard! He went to the window. More wood had been thrown in the fire and tongues of flame shot high into the air, throwing a dancing light nearly to his window. Certainly no messenger could approach it from that side! He took stock once more of the room and observed again how bare and square it was. Heavy boards formed the partition and there were no doors save the locked one just outside of which a gangster slept. His eyes swept the ceiling and he observed little cracks here and there,

but on the whole it presented a job well done; at least, no human could come through it!

Still, Pete refused to relax his vigil by the window. The night must be two-thirds spent, he guessed, and yet he doggedly refused to sleep. The kerosene light sputtered, its yellow flame giving way, little by little, to oily black smoke. The guards outside, one sleeping while the other watched, had kept the fire burning brightly throughout the night. The room was becoming bitterly cold, but the memory of his coat and the man it covered, made the frost in the air seem almost welcome. In spite of himself, as the minutes dragged on, his head refused to remain erect. Time after time it sank limply forward, only to be jerked back by an iron will. But nature could not be denied, and the nods, following each other in rapid succession, soon became fitful slumber.

A sudden feeling that he was not alone in the room roused him with a start. He whirled to face the door, and turned the sputtering wick in the lamp higher, as he searched every corner of the room. He was mistaken. Just another trick of overwrought nerves, he told himself, and settled back in his chair. He was hardly settled when a creaking overhead brought him again to his feet. Tap-tap-tap—something soft like a padded hammer was striking the board above him. He located the spot, and as

though fascinated, watched a knot, nearly two inches wide, first crack at the center, then crumble and finally fall. Silence followed, as breathlessly he waited, eyes glued on the hole. Then fingers, lily white in the near-darkness, stole through, and released a bit of folded paper, plummet-like, straight into his lap. Moving cautiously from the proximity of the window he hurriedly opened the note and read:

"Escape means death to Hawkins and you. Slim's trip to Jumbo Point and back will take ten days. Watch out for Bull, he means to kill you. Hawkins safe for present. Burn this, *now*. Tam."

He read the words again, this time more slowly. Then he removed the smoky chimney of the lamp, and touched a corner of the paper to the flame. Sudden light flooded the room and Peter looked cautiously out at the guards. But if they had seen it, they had no concern over it, and Pete eagerly raised his eyes again to the knothole. The fingers re-appeared and a second note descended. Again Pete leaned close to the light and read: "Three swings come to light, two swings repeated three times, Eliot returning. One complete circle at midnight, Hawkins well, improving."

Pete crammed the code into his pocket and stood face up under the hole. Fearing to speak he made the motion of writing on his outstretched palm, and almost immediately, his

answer came in the shape of a pencil and bit of brown paper. Hurriedly he scribbled a note:

"Judge John Stivers,
Pacific Club, San Francisco.

Innocent of robbery. Now in gangsters' hands. One move to save me might mean death. Get complete criminal record of Buller Garret, whose finger prints are inclosed on card. Hurry record to Tamarack Sue, address inclosed.—Peter."

Quickly he folded the message over the cards from his pocket and stretched his arm toward the ceiling. A foot of space intervened, but he mounted the bed and leaned far over. Then for a moment the slender fingers of the messenger met his. He whispered excitedly, "Put your address in; bring answer to me." Pete started at the icy coldness of the fingers he held, as he waited for a whispered answer. But none came, and even the fingers lingered for only a moment, and Pete knew that she had gone.

* * * *

CHAPTER VII

TOWARD a miniature valley, far up on the mountainside, nestling between tall tamaracks that stood out like sentinels against the background of snow, Tamarack Sue, or Tam, as she was called, made her way.

Quickly she glided along, leaving scarcely a trace on the frozen crust of wind-swept snow. Accustomed as she was to mountain life and the rigours of winter, the strain of the last few days had nevertheless drawn heavily upon her vitality. Emerging at last over the remaining steep ridge of the trail she entered her cabin, and closed the door softly behind her, then sank wearily down on a huge bearskin rug before a smouldering grate fire and slept. The trip to the prison-house had been a hard one, indeed few men could have made it in the short time she had been on the trail. Exhausted now, she slept heavily and far into the morning.

Arising at last, greatly refreshed, but still with the haunted, haggard look in her eyes, she hastily prepared a meal for two and opened a door that led into the only other room in the house. In this room on a wide, comfortable bed, lay Hawkins. He had drawn heavily upon the store of strength that clean living and

a rugged constitution gave him. His fever was gone now, and he could talk, if his nurse would permit him. Instead she had her finger to her lips even as she opened the door.

"Now, not a word," she whispered softly as she carried light food to his bedside. "I have lots and lots to tell you, but first of all I must rush away again. I must meet the morning train, I have important letters to mail. Eat now."

As she carried the food in spoonfuls to his lips she talked:

"Buller will be here today, and you must be *very* sick. If you must talk, tell him I have gone for medicine, that you think I'll be back too late with it the way you feel. Please don't talk unless you have to. Your friend is safe; I saw him last night."

The food he ate gave him strength, but the sight of the girl herself, a mere child she seemed, and one more fitted for the parlor than the sinister work of the last few days, was a tonic that only nature, master physician, could prescribe.

With the fondness of a doting grandfather Hawkins followed her every movement. How sweet and wholly feminine she seemed in her simple woolen skirt, close fitting sweater and high leather shoes! Hair, ordinarily fluffy and light, struggled hard against the severe re-

straint of braids that fell carelessly over her shoulders, as she bent over him.

In twenty-four hours' time she had won a complete victory over the honest doubts of the mountaineer. And little wonder! He loved a fighter of any kind, but here was one, a mere girl, waging a fight almost single-handed against gangsters at one end, and the Salmon River Gold Company at the other.

She had poured out her pathetic story as soon after his trip to her house as possible. And such a story! Until the death of Dan Morgan, her father, she explained, life had been one glorious season after another in the mountains she loved so well. Moapa schools had given her all the education she had, but she was happy because her brother Hal, and her voice had choked at mention of his name, was attending a University in the west; and their little mine, The Glory Hole, could not send them both to school. Then, only two years before, trouble had come. Just when they were certain a big strike was imminent at the Glory Hole Mine, the men quit working. For some strange reason, it seemed impossible to get more. When they did manage to start up, a terrible explosion had occurred, burying four of the men and most of their tools, besides placing obstacles in the way of striking the expected gold that would require months to

remove. All this preyed heavily on the mind of old Dan, her father. He could not sleep nights, and he pecked away hopelessly and alone by day at the mass of muck in the tunnel, never giving up hope. The strain had lasted with him nearly six months before it ended in a little grave beneath the tamaracks. For months before the tragic end, Tam had kept letters to her father from Hal, letters pleading for money, carefully hidden away. Hal had been unable to come to the simple little funeral, and his letters grew farther and farther apart.

Then J. D. Browning came into her life. Tenderly he had sympathized with her in her grief. Gallantly he offered her a contract, calling for five thousand shares of stock in the proposed Salmon River Gold Co., Inc., for her mine, which was, as he pointed out, just a junk heap. Even so, she had urged, the mine was all she and her brother had and she refused to trade it for the stock. At every turn Browning continued to do what he could to help her, until finally, simple girl that she was, she had gracefully thanked him and agreed to the deal if her brother, who had a half interest with her under the will her father left, would also sign. Weeks passed before Hal finally wrote that the Salmon River Gold Co. must be a fake, as it was almost wholly unknown where he had made inquiries and anyhow he would have noth-

ing to do with it. Then after weeks of silence, Susie had received a second letter, stating simply that her brother had changed his mind about the Company and had signed the contract. Tam's signature followed his and she prepared to leave the little cabin beneath the tamaracks, to live in Moapa. When she applied for stock or money, however, she was gently but firmly given to understand by Houston, the Company lawyer, that no stock or money could be handed over until all the claims along Gulch Creek had been secured. The blow had been a shock to her, but she knew nothing of business, and so could only wait patiently for further developments. She wrote to her brother for advice, but received no answer. Then months and months passed, until, realizing the danger of her plight, Houston had obligingly given her work as a clerk in the Government Land Office. Here she had heard rumors that had set her thinking, rumors that became more and more persistent, until finally she sought out J. D. Browning himself and demanded an explanation.

Then it was that Browning, with greatly affected emotion, told her that her brother, needing money, had forged a check and was in prison. Grief and humiliation stunned her, and for a time she knew not which way to turn. In desperation she wrote letter after letter to her

brother, but received only one message in reply. A message that stated simply, "I am innocent, mining lawyers responsible." After this, she seemed to have lost faith in mankind, she explained, and finally went alone to the cabin beneath the tamaracks, that had once been a happy home, and prayed for guidance.

There it was, beside her father's cold grave, that she had sworn vengeance against Browning and the Salmon River Gold Co.

She opened her campaign of vengeance by feigning complete submission, and begging Browning to tell her what she might do to keep her brother's plight from becoming known. Browning was quick to use her and gradually, as weeks passed into months, she worked into his schemes and plans, until at last she became his trusted propagandist among the miners she knew, obviously working for Browning's cause. It was on this service that she had first met Hawkins, and while she had met him only casually, nevertheless, so well did she play her part, that Hawkins set her down at once as a clever agent of the Company.

Here, too, she had met Buller Garret and his gang. Early in their acquaintance Buller had become infatuated with her, and this combined with her habit of eavesdropping from the attic of the cabin, made it much easier for her to collect odds and ends of events that ex-

plained many mysterious happenings in the hills. By the merest chance she had happened upon Buller the very day his gang set out to ambush Hawkins and Peter. At first she had pleaded with him to shed no blood, but instantly saw her mistake, for to show the slightest sympathy or concern for any other man, sealed his death warrant if Garret had the authority from headquarters to back him up. She had succeeded, however, in persuading him to spare the life of Hawkins long enough to permit her to find out the true location of the mythical fifty thousand dollars of which she had overheard Alguin and his mate talk.

So far matters were yet well in hand, but Tam was becoming visibly alarmed at the sullen mood in which she found Buller on their last meeting, and she soon became convinced that it would require all of the cunning she could muster if she was to keep Hawkins alive until Eliot returned. What would happen after that, she dared not think. Even at the thought if it, she shuddered. She ended her story in sobs, and complained bitterly against the horror of it all!

Little wonder, then, that Hawkins looked upon her with something akin to sheer wonder, as she finished feeding him and made ready for the gruelling trip to Moapa. Before she left his bedside, she let him read the note she was

to post, and seemed pleased when he nodded his head in warm approval, as he handed the envelope back.

"God bless you, child," he murmured fervently, as she tidied up the crude little sick room and closed the door behind her.

For nearly an hour Hawkins lay there, staring at the ceiling and going over and over again the pathetic story of the child who now held his life in her hands. Then the door opened again and Buller Garret entered! Triumph, or momentary gloating, something certainly, was struggling for supremacy over the sullen expression of fear in the lowering face of the gangster. Hawkins felt certain Buller must have met Susie on the trail.

"Didn't work, huh?" Buller came to the point at once.

Hawkins indicated mystery at the question as best he could with his eyes.

"Oh, hell, you've been *talkin'* all right, I'm wise to ya, but ya can't queer me," Buller paused and seemed to dwell again on the scene he must have had on the trail below. Then, apparently satisfied, but craving more to come, he resumed his words. "Now, listen to me, Hawkins," he began, as he pulled a chair close to the bedside, "yer not quite done fer yet, even if she does think ya might be." Another reminiscent pause, and then he went on. "Ya know

why we got rough with ya? Thought ya'd dig up some old stuff on me, huh? Well, I was wise all along. Those checks didn't figger." This, at least, was strange talk to Hawkins. "But the other stuff did. J. D. wised me all along how ya was trying to dig up some of the deals around here an' fasten 'em onto me." Hawkins was learning things. Replying as best he could with his face and eyes, he kept the man talking.

"Don't know how much ya *think* ya know. That's what I'm takin' a chance on. But I just slipped up here to buzz ya on one point, whatever ya *think* ya know, fergit it. Fergit what happened in old Dan's mine, most of all."

Buller's cunning eyes watched narrowly the effect of his words, but Hawkins acted well, and Buller discovered little that either confirmed or disproved his suspicions.

"There's nobody hittin' this Tamarack trail but me and Sue," he finally resumed, "so don't ya go figurin' on anybody from the outside. If yer do, it won't be healthy fer ya, or yer scissor-bill friend down at the shacks. Don't want any strangers to come sittin' in on our game." So saying, he walked leisurely about the room, until his roaming glance fell on bits of feminine apparel, that until now had escaped him. His eyes brightened, and he sucked in saliva with air in deep breaths, as he looked at

them. A faded slip of blue, which anyone but Bull would have recognized as the remnants of happy girlhood days, caught his eye. Close by, and partly covering it, hung a huge fur coat. He dwelled on it for a moment, and his face darkened. He had seen the coat before, on Peter Alden. The expression of a thug wielding a black-jack played on his face, as he hurled the offending garment from its wooden peg, and kicked it to the corner of the room. Would he never quit associating the two? He cursed, and bit his lips as he stood scowling at the crumpled coat. He turned again to the faded blue dress and continued his brooding silence.

Hawkins looked into a new face when Buller again approached his bedside. Murder was written there! Not honest manly anger, but venom inflamed by distorted promptings of the inner man, long sick.

Yet he said not a word, as he gathered up his coat and cap and made for the door.

Hawkins, alone again, shivered at the thought of his fellow-prisoner, in the cabin below.

CHAPTER VIII

“**D**ON'T tell me about it, John, don't tell me about it.” The feeble voice of Alden, Sr., could scarcely be heard against the roar of pounding waves. “You saw his letter, so did I. ‘Now you have the truth,’ he wrote. He's dead in here, John, he's best dead in here!” Alden indicated his heart, as he tapped uncertainly, and looked, dry-eyed far out into the sea.

Day after day, Judge Stivers had been with him, comforting, reassuring, trying desperately to check the tide of melancholy bitterness that was fast engulfing his friend. Clubs, theatres, hosts of friends at the house, even golf, failed to penetrate the dry painful stare in the eyes of the once proud old man.

Today the Judge had tried the beach, but so far with disappointing results. He tried hard to tell Alden how detectives were proceeding with their work. Though he had little to tell him, certainly, still he would cheerfully have perjured himself a hundred times rather than witness the constant grief his friend was suffering.

For over an hour they sat thus in the sun; neither speaking, each apparently watching the oily sea lions pop up from foaming waves, shake

their heads in the spray and glide back into the water.

Alden spoke: "Then, why doesn't he deny it, why doesn't he come here?" For an instant he had forgotten himself, and the rest of the sentence slipped back on the silent track of his mind, where it continued its circuit, starting and ending always in the same place.

But the few words had given Judge Stivers the proof he wanted. Alden, in spite of himself, still doubted his son's guilt! Faint as the doubt might be, it was there. It must be fed, enlarged, until it crowded out the dense blackness of utter abandon and despondency from his heart. Rapier-like the skilled jurist thrust questions and problems at his friend, none seemingly near the thought in both of their minds, yet all, nevertheless, used for a purpose.

As they talked, clouds gathered in the sky, and a sudden rift played sunshine like a spotlight on the seal rocks before them.

"See those seals, Peter?" John's stick pointed out the playful animals.

"Yes, John. I've been watching them."

"But, do you notice that some of them have been perfectly still on the rocks these two hours?"

"Yes, some of them have, I believe."

"And some of them are constantly scampering about?"

"Yes, some of them, yes, I've noticed it."

"But do you notice that the ones lying so quietly there in the sun, are mostly old ones, Peter?"

Peter's eyes had been looking in the direction of the seal rocks, but seeing far, far beyond. Now he stirred himself as though from a dream, and observed more closely the movements of the animals the Judge so insistently pointed out.

"What was it you asked me, John? Excuse me, but the waves are so noisy here."

"I was wondering if you noticed that those seals out there, the ones that are quiet so long, are mostly the old, full grown ones?"

"Oh, yes, yes, yes. So they are. Strange, isn't it?"

"No, quite natural, I think. Now take the youngsters there. There goes one now, see him flap his tail against the old duffer? Now watch him."

Alden was beginning to take an interest in the antics of the seals.

"See," continued the Judge, "he deliberately waited for that big breaker before he plunged. See, the old one hardly noticed him." Stivers watched his friend closely from the corner of his eyes.

"You'd think he'd go in after him, wouldn't you?" old Alden mused.

"Yes," Stivers hesitated, "one would think

so, but you see, seals understand each other, I guess. Look, now the youngster is gone for good it seems. Yet the old one has not even flapped a fin! Only his head in the air, notice that? But wait a minute, the youngster will come back. It's all in the game of bucking the waves, I guess. Yes, yes, there he comes, look, right over the top of the rock. Ha! Ha! Good for you, youngster!" Even Alden had become interested, as the baby seal came playfully down the shiny rock, after its long plunge in the foaming waves.

"You see, Peter, the old one is wise after all; that youngster's got to face the ocean alone some day, and he knows he must learn to buck the waves now."

"Well, he's a thoroughbred, John, he surely picked a big one," Alden mused, with just a flicker of his old self in his expression.

The eyes of the dear old friends met, and something passed between them, something warm and comforting. Perhaps it was a silent message from one man's soul to another.

As they arose to go, Peter's arm tenderly encircled the slim waist of his friend. "John," he said, "it's good to have you around. Come home with me, tonight, won't you?"

"Business first, then pleasure," cheerfully answered the Judge. "I've some business at the office, then I'll come out and give you the

worst lam-basting you've had in your entire pinochle career!"

"Judge, you're a darned hard cuss to beat, guess that's why I like you. But I'll teach you yet, that you can't beat an Alden. The cards will be ready when you come, John. Good-bye."

As Judge Stivers made his way toward his office, he breathed his first sigh of relief in fourteen days. He entered his private suite almost briskly, gathered up his mail, and sat running it impatiently through his fingers, keeping his eyes the while on the door as though expecting a visitor.

Promptly at six the door opened, and a keen looking man of perhaps forty, with heavy head, a square face and grey cropped mustache, that blended harmoniously with silver-sprinkled hair, entered. The frame and general demeanor of the man stamped him at once as a detective.

Stivers fairly bounced out of his chair as he prepared to receive the expected report: "Well, out with it, report, report!" he snapped, by way of greeting. For a Judge he was uncommonly impatient, but his visitor was apparently used to him.

"Not much to report, Judge, so far," he replied, quite cheerfully. "Can't find hide nor

hair of young Alden, and I guess it's just as well."

"What do you mean, sir, 'just as well'?"

"I mean, it looks more every day as though he *did* steal the money."

"Bah, I thought you were a detective. He didn't do it. Don't I know? I've been facing criminals for forty years, and I know them. That boy isn't half as much of a thief as you are!"

Sherman Mays, head of Mays' Detective Agency, winced. He had been serving John Stivers for a dozen years or more, and he knew only too well the accuracy of the Judge in classifying men with whom he came in contact.

"Anyhow," the Judge continued, "I've been noticing lately that you're beginning to use a lot of new-fangled methods, and forgetting the good old hustling you used to do."

Mays balked at this. "Why did he run away, Judge, and where did he run to?" he asked significantly.

"How do I know?" Stivers snapped. "That's what I came all the way down here for, to find out."

"And how do you account for the letter to his father?" Mays continued.

"Don't have to account for it. You're on the wrong track, Sherman. Can't I knock it

into your head that he's innocent?" The peppery old man spelled out the word I-n-n-o-c-e-n-t. "I gave positive instructions that you're to go on the assumption that he's *not* guilty." In his anger the Judge banged the handful of unopened letters on the desk before him, half of them shooting off into Mays' lap.

Mays welcomed the opportunity to do most anything rather than look into the face of the irate Judge. As he slowly gathered the letters together and handed them back, the Judge commenced opening them in a mechanical sort of way, apparently desiring his words to sink in before continuing his tirade.

A special delivery letter, addressed in a distinctive feminine hand, caught his eye.

With more than ordinary attention he ran the keen blade of a paper knife the length of it and shook out the contents. What he saw changed his entire demeanor, and when he spoke again, even the detective caught the poorly suppressed excitement the letter had evidently created.

"Now Sherman, here is something," he announced. "This girl, or woman, writes from Moapa, Montana; she says—well here, read it yourself."

Mays went carefully over the letter, enclosures, and even examined the postmarks on the envelope before he replied:

"Well, what do you think?"

"That this card will tell who did the trick, of course."

"But, Judge, do you see this, 'Don't turn a finger to help him yet,' and this, 'He's in much graver danger than an ordinary burglar, which he isn't, would be,' Judge, there's something queer about all this."

"That's what I think." The Judge stroked his Van Dyke meditatively. "This signature is young Alden's writing all right, no mistake about that. He says, 'Don't help,' too. Funny, Sherman, isn't it? Most of the letter is written by the woman, too."

"Let's see the name at the bottom of that letter again, Judge. Thanks." Sherman studied it long, and carefully. "Morgan, Morgan—Susie Morgan, Moapa." He repeated the words slowly. "Seems right enough. Who's this she talks about, Garret, Buller Garret? That's probably a new fixture he's taken on, whoever he is. So they think he's got a 'record.' Well, we can find out about *that* anyhow."

"Sherman, I'm going out to the house—Alden's. Can you get a line on this record, to-night?"

"Certainly, if he's *got* one, I can."

"Good, look it over and if it's out of the ordinary—no, no matter what it is, 'phone me

at Alden's. 'Phone me, anyhow, but don't start anything new and drop whatever you've been doing, which isn't very much, scarcely anything, as far as I can see," the Judge added significantly, "until we can talk this over again. You have my number? All right, at the house."

Detective Mays took the tell-tale playing card, handed back to Judge Stivers the letter that came with it and both left the office.

"Ought to feel good at getting a little daylight into this thing," the Judge remarked to Mays in the corridor, "but for some reason or other, I'm beginning to feel *worse* about it. Hope you find a record, Mays. Get it as soon as you can, won't you? Fine! Good-bye, till I hear from you."

Judge Stivers found Alden as despondent as he could ever remember seeing him. The cards he had promised almost enthusiastically when they parted, were not in evidence, and instead Alden sat motionless, gazing into the grate fire, hardly turning at all to greet the Judge. But Stivers was becoming accustomed to these strange spells, and made no comment, as he drew his chair alongside, and gazed long into the fire before he spoke. A sudden burst of flame broke the spell:

"Fire feels comfortable these nights, Peter."

"Yes, John, very comfortable."

"You're burning eucalyptus logs, aren't you?"

"I believe they are, yes, they are eucalyptus."

"When they blaze that way, Peter, they throw out a perfume, don't they?"

"A perfume, yes. Yes, they throw out a perfume."

"But not much heat, when they blaze."

"You're comfortable, though, John?" Peter almost eagerly made to ring a bell.

"Oh, yes, yes, quite, thank you, don't ring. I was just noting how the logs burned, that is all."

"Yes, John, the logs."

"I was just saying, when they flame, they throw out perfume, but not so much heat."

"But all logs are that way, aren't they, John?"

"Yes, the heat is there, though, but it's when they're reduced to solid coals that you feel it most."

"I often sit here, John, long after the flames are gone."

"Even the coals that are covered with dead grey ashes are hot inside, aren't they, Peter?"

"Yes, very hot; hardwood always makes hot logs."

"They must be, Peter, or the new ones you

throw on would never burn, they could never get started without them."

The butler approached and threw some logs on the fire.

Alden shifted in his chair.

"You know, John, I've had an idea lately that you think I'm old. Tomorrow I believe I'm going to take you out and put you in your proper place. What do you say to a little golf?"

"Maybe I don't think you're getting old, Peter, but your memory is certainly getting tired, or something. Here I came over to beat you at a game of pinochle."

"That's right, John, you're right, well, that's one on me. I say," calling the butler, "the cards." Then turning again to the Judge: "Well, we'll settle this card game right off, in short order."

Three hours later they were still playing. The Judge was becoming nervous. Twice he forgot to draw cards.

"John, you'd think that telephone was responsible for my walloping you. Leave it alone. The way you are looking at it . . ."

The butler announced a gentleman to see Judge Stivers.

"Show him in here." Alden interrupted before Stivers could arise from the table.

"Don't get up, John, bring your friend right here."

The Judge started to protest, but was interrupted by the sudden appearance of Detective Mays. Alden recognized the man, and instantly his pleasant humor of the past few hours departed, and left him struggling with emotion, sorely wounded pride and undecided will. He hesitated a moment, then said slowly:

"I'll be in the library when you are through, John." Then, without a word or further glance at the detective, he left the room.

Stivers turned quickly to Mays and asked, "Did you get it?"

"Yes, I got it. Fine bird!"

"Let's see it."

Stivers unrolled a bundle of papers and read:

"James Hogan, alias Jimmie Duffy, alias Buller Garrett, age 38, weight 140 pounds, height five feet five inches, hair and eyes black, skin yellow, slightly pock-marked, escaped from San Quention 19.... while serving life term for murder. Wanted for murder of ——. Member of famous gang of crooks and gunmen. Last seen near Maysville, Cal., heading east, desperate character, will stop at nothing."

"No mistake about all this?" Stivers tapped the paper with his forefinger.

"Absolutely none, finger-prints tallied perfectly. Chief tells me he's one of the worst gangsters San Francisco's ever had."

"Hum, let's read those letters again."

The two men took seats and carefully went over the messages Tam, or Susie Morgan, as she signed her name, had sent. At the end of an hour, the conference showed signs of breaking up, but not until Judge Stivers had finished writing a letter.

"This will give them enough to call out the State Militia, if necessary," he remarked, as he handed the sheets to Mays. "Post this at once. Better stop all investigations until we get a reply; both of them have warned us to do nothing yet, you know, and we'd better go easy."

"Very well, sir." So saying, Mays took the letter and departed.

Stivers joined Alden in the library. "You know, Peter," he said, as though forming a plan aloud, which was meant only for his own mind, "I believe a brisker climate, snappier air, would do you good."

"Snappier air?" Alden fairly shouted, "I'm freezing now; thought you fellows never would leave that fire!"

"That's because your blood's thin, Peter, that's all. Now I'm called away on some *personal* business to Montana," he emphasized the "personal" with as significant a look as possi-

ble, then continued. "Don't know when I'll go, but if I do, you've got to come along."

"Well," old Alden reflected testily, "guess I *am* seeing too much of the old things. I'll see, I'll think it over."

* * * *

CHAPTER IX

" . . . And that's all I have, all I have after these many months. Isn't it discouraging, Mr. Hawkins?" The latter, leaning back against soft pillows, took little slips of paper, one at a time, from Tam's hand, and read each one with care, as she explained its meaning.

The slips of paper represented all of the notes, dates and facts Susie had been able to collect in waging her lone battle of vengeance against the Salmon River Gold Co., Inc.

"I'm afraid we're too late, little girl, we're much too late. You should have come to me, or to someone, months ago," was Hawkins only comment as he finished reading.

"Oh, I wanted to, so badly, but whom could I trust? Everyone seemed in with them! And then my poor brother! I couldn't let anyone here know of him! But I did intend getting help, after I had done all I could. You see, I knew so little of business, Mr. Hawkins. But tell me, *why* am I too late?" Yet, even as she spoke, Tam knew that the task she had undertaken was far too great, and that Hawkins was right after all.

"You've signed away your mine, Tam, and so have the other small placer claim holders

along both sides of the creek; Browning owns Salmon Tooth Pass, so even if you had your claims restored, how could you come in and out? They are too strong, Tam, too strong. Why, they wanted my Dead Horse Mine. I held out, and look what they've done to me!" In spite of his emaciated face his jaw muscles bulged as he contemplated on this last remark.

"But if I can prove they really stole those claims from dozens of miners, and that they don't intend developing them, that they only want to sell stock, won't they be compelled to give them back?"

"Prove it!" Hawkins winced with pain as he snorted the words. "How? Every office is filled with Company men! Even the Land office is bulging with them; *what* chance have you?"

"But the others! They will all find out that their contracts are valueless; surely they will rise up and demand their rights," Tam protested.

"Yes, some of them will, Tam, some of them; but the miners aren't together. Spies are everywhere! Where is Jonas? Here, look!" Hawkins selected a yellow slip, Tam's own note. "Here you are, 'disappeared,' it reads, that's what happend to *one* miner that talked too much. Here's another, Crabtree, old Silas Crabtree. Made a complaint on Mon-

day, threatened action, disappeared on the following Wednesday. Something weird and mysterious about it, Tam. Don't you see how they work? The miners haven't a chance, not a chance!" Hawkins clenched his fist and groaned in evident pain.

"Then you mean," Tam asked testily, "that we will all lose our property, all of us, who have worked so hard and so long?"

"I'm afraid so, Tam, I'm beginning to think you will. I've tried to warn them all, but they called me an old gopher, and laughed at my advice. I thought I would strike something at the Dead Horse, and fight the Company back, but that's over, too, I guess."

"But you said you had a trick to turn, or something; surely you know some way it can be stopped; it can't be *all* lost! Oh, that would be too terrible! All these people, all of them cheated and ruined, it can't be! It must be stopped!" Susie's eyes sparkled with anger as she spoke.

"There's lots we *might* do, if I weren't here, but there's no time for all this now, child. It's seven days already since Slim Eliot started for Jumbo Point. He'll be crossing the ridge any day now, and when he comes," a worried frown came over Hawkins' face, "and when he comes, even you, Tam, won't be able to hold Buller Garret back."

Tamarack Sue shuddered as she answered: "I never saw him so terrible as he looked today, Mr. Hawkins. I thought he must have known of our signals, he questioned me so closely. I wonder how Mr. Alden is? I've been afraid to go near the house again; the snow has been so soft, that my tracks would surely show, but he has signaled back every night! He's alive at least. But what will happen when Eliot returns? And he may return in the night! We will *never* know! Oh, Mr. Hawkins, please let me get the sheriff and stop it all! He can at least delay things; give us a chance . . ."

"That's just what you *shouldn't* do," Hawkins replied firmly, "just as well ask J. D. himself to help you. They would arrest Pete for the robbery and for my murder. You're forgetting *these*, little girl." Hawkins tapped significantly at the slips of paper in his hand. "Tell the sheriff and it will mean just one more of these, that's all."

"But what can we do? We must do something," Tam protested, "I can't sit here and see you both murdered!" A horrified look came into her eyes. "It can't mean *that*, Mr. Hawkins, have we *no* way of preventing it? Oh, if Buller wasn't so *awfully* suspicious, if he'd only let me, I'd—I'd—Oh, Mr. Hawkins, we *must* stop this thing!" Tears rolled down

her cheeks as she buried her head in her arms and sobbed.

Thoroughly aroused, Hawkins tried to calm her. "But he *isn't* here yet. You got a signal, tonight? Well, Eliot won't try to pass the ridge at night; we have one more day, possibly two. Many things can happen in a day. The letter from San Francisco! On the way six days now; it should be here any time. Come, Tam, be brave, *something* will happen."

"But what can the letter do?" Tam asked through sobs.

"I don't know, but it *will* do something."

"If it only could," Tam pulled herself up with an effort, and dried her tears. "I'll go again to Moapa in the morning, but I'm *so* afraid to leave you, Mr. Hawkins. If Eliot *should* come while I'm gone, then Buller will find out, and he'll be terrible, just terrible; I think sometimes the man is insane."

"You pack a gun?" Hawkins asked anxiously, ignoring the danger he was soon to face, and thinking only of the plucky girl beside him.

"Always," she answered, "and I thought yesterday, I would use it. I carry it here." Tam indicated a little pocket over her hip, concealed by a fold in her sweater. "He looked at me so strangely, when he asked if you were better."

"Don't kill, Tam, until you have to; these

things are worrying your mind beyond reason. But don't let the grieving and worry get you, Tam, it doesn't pay. I've been in these hills twenty years and more; seen the old Alder Gulch rush when men were killed by their own brothers, all gold mad. Yes, and I've seen men crazy with liquor, killin' for sport when Moapa was only an Indian camp. But the gold-rush days ended. So did the wild days in the camp. Those times are all gone now, Tam, an' we're having a new kind of war. Bad as it was, a man could fight his own battles then. But it's different now. They brought law in then to stop murder and thieving; now they use it to kill and steal in lots of ways I'm not used to. No, Tam, guess I haven't got a trick to turn, after all. They're fighting way over my head now. We haven't a chance, not a chance. There's you, ought to be making a home warm and bright for some good man, yet, here you are, half crazy and fighting wild, and still you're not getting anywhere. Why don't you quit it all, and go away from here? Let the past go, Tam, let it go. It hurts, I know, but it's really past now, you see, and it can't come back. The old days are gone, and you belong to them, Tam. You don't fit now, and there's no use of you throwing yourself away." The long speech tired the old man visibly, but the

fervor of his words held Tam fascinated until he had finished.

Then she replied in a strange, thin voice. "Yes, Mr. Hawkins, I *do* belong to the old days, just like you, but *I* can no more leave the fight than *you*. Listen! Hear the wind moaning through the tamaracks—the tamaracks over father's grave? Every night they speak to me, urge me on and on! No, there is nothing else for me, nothing else in life." Susie hesitated and a shudder came over her. "What must decent folks think of me? Living with gangsters, one *of* them, for all people know. Even Mr. Alden, the first time he saw me, talked of—of—the Barbary Coast, and I know what he meant! How I hated him for it!" Her little hands clenched in anger. "But, I *can't* let him die, because he's so innocent of everything. But it doesn't matter what he, or anyone else thinks of me now, Mr. Hawkins. I'm going to answer the tamaracks, and then, when it's all over and my work is done, I'll go back to the past. Don't you see, Mr. Hawkins, I *can't* leave the fight, any more than you can?"

"Yes, girl, I understand, I understand. But you're all worked up now, we've both talked too long. You've got to signal yet and get some sleep. The fight seems to be in the dark, but it might be a short one, Tam, so better get

your rest, while you can. Good night, now, and God bless you!"

Down below in the prison house, Pete gazed fixedly out into the night. Hour after hour the dreary week had dragged by, with nothing to relieve the severe tension but the weird swing of the lamp on the mountain side at midnight.

Buller Garret seemed obsessed. Forced by his own suspicions and lust, he himself was compelled to spend weary hours, sometimes alone, in the house. The silence and monotony of the thing made him wretched to the point of violence. Alguin and his companions, too, sulked in silence or played cards alone. Even Pete, who heard nothing, was plainly aware that the mission of Slim Eliot was working as a wedge between the three. He had little hope from this, however, as he knew only too well the report Slim Eliot would bring. He had expected more visits from Susie, but the knot hole in the ceiling remained black and dead. The message to Judge Stivers was still the all-important thing; yet he had no knowledge of its fate. He was certain the Judge would reply, if he had received the letter! The suspense was maddening.

A frenzied desire to smash the window and rush the guards without had seized him with ever increasing frequency as the return of

Eliot drew near, and but for the certain result such a dash for liberty would have had on Hawkins he would have tried it. As it was, he could only sit and think. New forms had appeared at times about the table by the fireplace, and from these strangers he had overheard enough to piece together fragments here and there of the quiet undercurrent of intrigue and plotting that formed the basis of the warfare between the miners and the Company. But it was mostly a recital of victories for the latter; no one had seemed even slightly concerned over the efforts of the miners, men usually referred to as "gophers."

On this night, while Tam and Brud Hawkins were talking in the little cabin on the mountain side, Buller, for the first time in days, entered Pete's room and signified a desire to say something.

"Slim Eliot's back," he smirked as soon as he entered the room. But somehow he said it badly, and Pete knew he was bluffing.

"Then I can go in the morning," he answered, with well feigned pleasure.

"Huh, still thinking *thataway*, are ya? Well, forget it, he *ain't* back. But he will be; he's shakin' up in the pass tonight, he'll be here tomorrow."

"Then I'll be leaving tomorrow, just the same," Pete returned confidently.

Buller ignored the answer, and continued his smirking words.

"You're packin' around too much in yer *head*, that's what I came in to tell ya, and 'tain't healthy, that's what. I blowed in here fer to buzz ya about *knowin'* too much."

"Well, shoot," Pete still out-looked his visitor.

"How long have ya been knowin' the old Gopher?" Bull threw a snaky finger and glanced in the direction of the mountain side. "How long have ya two been . . . Well, knock me for a" Buller stood as though transfixed, as he looked out the window. Pete followed his gaze and saw the signal light completing a circle! For a moment neither spoke. Then with an expression of sudden understanding, Buller's eyes rested on Pete's lamp, standing directly in front of his window.

Instantly, as their eyes met, Pete's hands sought the back of a chair and Buller's the guns that hung by his side. But before a move could be made, Alguin with a sudden jerk threw open the door and stood apparently amazed at the posture of the two threatening figures. Buller wheeled on him.

"Now, Al, mebbe, you'll let me finish this job. Look up yonder!"

The three men looked out of the window, where the light was still circling. Pete knew

it would continue until he answered back, and he tried desperately to think of a ruse that would permit his doing so. But Alguin, unwittingly, or purposely, did it for him, when he stepped between the light and the window. Instantly the signaling on the hill stopped.

Buller jerked his head toward the door. "C'mon," he growled.

The two men, not once glancing at their prisoner, shut the door and locked it behind them and almost instantly thereafter the guards outside began nailing huge boards across the window.

Completely bewildered and helpless at the turn of events, Pete slumped down on his bed and waited. At length, hours afterward, it seemed, faint streaks of light stole through the narrow cracks of the window boards, telling him that it was again morning. He had no doubt that already men were on the way to Hawkins, agents of death in all probability, and that other men were on their way to Moapa, sent there to bring the Sheriff and his posse, also messengers of death, if Buller's nefarious scheme worked out.

Horrible as it was, Pete could not but feel a sense of relief. Something would happen soon, at any rate, and anything was better than sitting there day after day. Yet his heart fairly quivered with suppressed emotion as he pic-

tured Hawkins, friend of a day, nevertheless a man he would now face armed guards to save if he could! He thought of the girl, too, and his brows knitted. He had come to see more than the signal, when the light on the mountain side whirled at midnight. These, too, were gone now, he mused.

In spite of every effort, all of his plans harked back to the playing cards, and his note to Judge Stivers. He must make new plans now! Yet the thought no sooner entered his mind than he dismissed it as hopeless. New plans! He looked at his hands and saw them, still soft and whiter than ever. He stroked his face, and he suddenly realized that he had a beard, fully half an inch of it! His hair, too, was long, and his scalp itched. The entire scheme of things oppressed him. Even the thought of his father failed to stir his senses to action. Like a prisoner sentenced to death, he sat there with his back to the boarded window, and his eyes on the bolted door. For hours no one stirred and he had no idea how much of the day was gone. Yet, in spite of it all, he felt ravenously hungry. Hour after hour he sat there, unable to do more than look at the door, until at last the meagre light that played through the chink in the window dwindled to faint weak streaks. Then some one fumbled at the door, and a figure, strange to

Pete, entered, left a dirty pan of greasy food, a bowl of coffee, and left the room without a word.

The food, such as it was, appeased his hunger, and Pete ate ravenously. "They're waiting for Eliot, that must be it," he told himself aloud between gulps of coffee. For the hundredth time since his imprisonment, he studied the room for an avenue of escape. Again his eyes sought the window, but it was not made to open, and he feared the noise of breaking glass. Then, too, the boards were there now. Yet he might, he thought, by placing his eye close to the crack between them, watch for the signal once more. A forlorn hope! There would be no more signals, of that he felt certain. Again his eyes wandered toward the knot hole above his head. An idea struck him and he fumbled in his pocket for the stub of pencil Susie had given him. He still had the signal code in his pocket, and now he wrote hurriedly on the back of it:

"Dear Hawkins and Susie:

"Somehow I know you'e together. Don't bother about me, I'll get along, a way will come. If I never see you again always remember I am grateful for your kindness, and sorry if I have been in any way the cause of the terrible trouble we are all in. If you have a chance, and if you *know* I am dead, tell my father, San Francisco, that his boy was innocent of everything but a desire to be a worthy son. Good-bye.

"Peter Alden, Jr."

Then he tucked the note carefully through

the hole, letting his fingers linger there awhile, before once more resuming his tiresome chair, where he sat and waited for the coming of the Sheriff. It was dark in the room and his lamp had not been removed, he noticed, but he feared to light it lest the meagre supply of oil become exhausted before night. In spite of himself, he still hoped that the cover of darkness would bring to him some word from the outside.

The house was strangely still, yet he knew he was not alone, for the partition between his room and the one in which the fire burned felt warm, and occasionally he heard logs being thrown on the fire without. Still no one came near him, and no one spoke, at least not loudly enough for him to hear.

Little flashes of red light from the guards' fire began to replace the sombre slits of twilight through the boards on the window, when at last he heard voices, loud, unrestrained, from men seemingly in a hurry.

Pete had played football in college, and remembered well the feeling that gripped him when the kick-off whistle blew. He had that feeling now, as he listened to the voices.

"Sheriff's coming from Moapa tonight, 'ell be here 'bout twelve, I guess," some one was saying. The same voice continued:

"Eliot, you got to do a lot more hikin' yet, tonight."

Then another voice broke in as though replying to Eliot, whose words Pete had not heard. "No," it said, "to hell with the fifty thousand dollars, knew that was bunk. But the bird in here that give you the bum steer is worth *five thousand* berries, and we're gettin' in our claims afore they string 'im."

Before the speaker finished, Pete recognized the voice; it was little Alguin talking.

"Hawkins bumped, then?" some one asked.

"Sure, he's bumped," Alguin grunted. "Bull's been gone four hours already, ought to be back now. Anytime Bull goes a bumpin' he's sure fire. You looked everywhere for the fifty, Eliot, no signs anywhere?"

Someone stamped loudly on the door sill, and Pete could not get the answer. The man stamping was apparently a newcomer, and both men within greeted him.

"Hello, Bull, come in," they called together.

Pete heard chairs dragged across the room, but the voices were close together and were much subdued. He tiptoed quietly toward the door to listen. Half-way across the room he was stopped short by the movement of something dragging across the rough boards above his head. With a rapid stride he made for the lamp and struck a match. Even before the

sudden light flared up his eyes sought the knot-hole. There a long folded envelope, held tightly between white fingers, showed in relief against the ceiling. While Pete hesitated a moment between lighting the lamp and reaching for the message, the match flickered and died in his hand. Without lighting another, he made a bound to the bed, and swept the ceiling with his hand. With heart pounding like a trip hammer, his arm circled about wildly for a moment that seemed like an hour, before his hand closed hungrily about the slender fingers. A second might mean discovery, yet his hand lingered, lingered while he sent his mute message of heart-felt appreciation to the messenger. A moment there, a heavy sigh, and the hands parted. Pete hardly had the lamp burning before the rustle above died away, and he knew Tam was gone.

With frantic haste he examined the two missives in his hand, a note and an envelope, unopened. He opened the note first and read.

"They've done away with him, I'm going, too. In haste. Tam."

With a pang of remorse that entirely shattered his growing enthusiasm he opened the long letter and withdrew two pictures, and a printed slip. Heavy black figures, 130-666, first caught his eye; then the pictures, both

of James Hogan, alias Buller Garret, so the legend at the bottom ran. Turning again to the printed slip he found it contained a list of crimes, which he carefully studied before shoving the papers into his pocket.

Tears dimmed his eyes as he read and re-read the note, "I'm going, too," what could that mean? Pete's face went cold. "They've done away with him." He turned the wick in the lamp higher, for the note seemed smeared. He held it closer to the light. "They've," he commenced reading aloud; ah! she had first written "not," then erased it. He looked more closely. No! She had not erased it entirely! A rush of sudden hope came over him. "They've *not* done away with him," he read. If it were only true! But she *had* erased the word, and only the impression of the sharp pencil was left. Yet, it might be true.

A noise of scraping chairs in the room outside ended his speculation. Quickly he touched the paper to the flame and rubbed the charred remains into his boot tops. Men entered. A triumphant leer dominated the face of the leader, Buller Garret.

"Get ready, Mr. J-a-r, we're goin' to meet the Sheriff. No use *hangin'* round here, hey boys?" Even the dull wits of the gangsters caught the play of words, and they laughed roughly as Pete looked on, apparently at ease.

"I'm beginning to like it around here, rather bad night to travel anyhow, isn't it?" Pete answered, seeming more at ease than at any time since his capture.

As he spoke he observed that the men back of Buller became irritable. Pete's words had plainly sat badly with them.

"Puttin' on yer hat, or goin' thataway?" Buller snarled, then without waiting for a reply continued, "guess it 'ud look better if ya *didn't* wear a hat, at that." Buller then turned and spoke to a companion: "Better let 'im wear the evidence. Here, put 'er on." The latter was spoken to Pete, as Buller tossed a fur coat to the floor before him. In the dingy light of the room Pete made out Hawkins' blood-smeared coat, and winced at the sight.

"C'mon, or we'll knock ya cold an' drag yer out. That'd look better yet. Whadda *you* think?" Buller turned to the men and even as he spoke one of them slinked out from the doorway and edged his way past Pete.

"Oh, I've been dragged before, isn't so bad," Pete bantered, backing to the wall, as he spoke. "Funny, everytime I get hit on the head," looking straight at Buller, "I see numbers, lots of 'em," Pete marked them off in the air with his finger 1-3-0-6-6-6 "just like that," he continued in a solemn voice, "big black ones."

If Pete had struck with his fist, he could not have delivered a more stunning blow. Buller wavered a moment, a hint of the hunted animal coming over him. Then for an instant he quavered, before he regained his air of bravado.

"He's goin' nuts, fellers, let's get goin' or the Sheriff'll beat us here."

"Better talk to me first, for a minute or two, Jimmy Hogan, I mean Buller. Maybe I can tip you on something that *might* happen."

Pete's words found their mark, and Buller, his hands shaking visibly, motioned the men about him to remain quiet. Nervously he moistened his dry lips and only the dimness of the light saved him from the puzzled stare of the gangsters about him. "The—the—them signals didn't look too good to me, fellers," he stammered, "better let me buzz this bird alone, fer jest a second; maybe he oughta be bumped right here, *now*." So saying, he nodded his head in the direction of the door, and stood with shaking hand on the butt of his gun, while the men walked slowly out. Then turning to Pete, he tried once more to bluff it out.

"I'm wise, what's the game?"

"You are convict number 130-666, Jimmy Hogan, alias Jimmy Duffy, alias Buller Garret. They want to *hang* you out Frisco way for the murder of . . ."

"I said I was wise," Buller interrupted, visibly weakening, "what's the game? Yer the only livin' soul in Moapa with the goods on me. Think I'll let you buzz the Sheriff? Say not. You been livin' *too* long already."

"Don't get in a hurry, Jimmy, bumpin' *me* won't get *you* anywhere. You went thieving through my pockets when you dragged me in here, didn't you? Well, how did I get these? They weren't in my pockets, *then*," Pete finished his words by flashing the record from his pocket.

"A dick, by God, you *are* a dick! But you ain't got me, not yet," Buller jabbered in sudden fear. and with a wild movement reached for his gun. But his quavering nerves and thoroughly beaten spirit refused to obey his sudden frenzy. With one lunge Pete had his arms vice-like about the writhing body of the gangster. "One word, Jimmy Hogan, an' you cash in," he hissed as he fought silently for the gun. Bull was beaten before the struggle began, beaten by the inherent fear of the law that rests in the heart of every criminal. His frail body was no match for the powerful Pete, who bore upon him like an avalanche. A moment, only, and the silent struggle was over as Pete lifted his man bodily through the air and sent him smashing down on the bed. Throwing caution to the wind he leaped upon him like a wild

animal, gouging his fingers deep into the flabby throat beneath him. For a moment he shook him with the frenzy of a madman, then sat him down with a bang into a chair.

Alarmed at the noise, several of the men rushed in from the door step leading out of the house, and opened the door of Pete's room.

"Tell 'em to wait, you dog, or this thing talks!" Pete stood, back to the door, menacing Buller with his own gun. "Quick, tell 'em!"

Buller gasped for breath.

"Stay out a minute," he called, and rose weakly to his feet to do with a wave of the arm what his words could not convey.

In the semi-darkness of the room the gangsters saw nothing wrong and one of them shouted:

"The Sheriff's most here, if you ain't comin', we're goin'." Then they resumed their stand on the steps of the cabin.

"Now I'm talking," Pete began, as he again stood over Bull, "and *you* listen. I'm not working alone in this game. We could have had you long ago, but we're not after you. Touch one hair of my head, though, you or *anybody*, and you're going up, don't forget that. We're watching *you*. Leave me alone and behave yourself, and we won't bother you. Now call those men in, tell 'em you're all

wrong, I'm somebody else, Philip West will do. Hurry up."

Buller knew that a reply was useless, and said not a word. Walking slowly to the door, he called in the men from the snow-covered steps.

"This bird ain't Peter Alden," he announced in a thin shaky voice. "We're all wrong, Peter Alden got away, somehow. This is Philip West." Before the astonished and bewildered gangsters could reply, three men emerged from the darkness and came rapidly toward the group, which still stood half in and half out of the house. On hearing the three men approach, Pete joined the group.

"Well," one of the newcomers announced, "I'm Olcott, the Sheriff. Where's this Alden?"

"Hell, you're hours late, he bumped Hawkins and flew the coop. Gone," Buller answered.

"Which way did he go, where's his tracks?" Olcott snapped.

For a moment the gangsters were taken by surprise, as the sharp eyes of the Sheriff searched their faces.

"Think he made it out the back way," Pete volunteered, motioning toward the rear of the house.

"Let's see," the Sheriff answered testily, as

he produced a flashlight from his pocket, and led the way to the rear of the string of houses.

"Here's his trail, right enough," he finally called out to his two companions. "Damn small feet though. Funny." He hesitated a moment and fumbled in his pocket for a folded bit of paper, which Pete recognized as the handbill showing his very picture. "That's it, he's still wearing his city shoes. Come on, men, let's after him. But wait a minute. Where's Hawkins, Buller? You say he's done for?"

"Taking him to Moapa, Tamarack Sue's snakin' him in on a sled, ought're be there by now."

Apparently satisfied, the Sheriff and his party went on, to follow, as Pete knew, the trail left by Tam.

As soon as the posse was lost in the darkness Pete pulled Buller aside, and spoke close to his ear. "Where's Hawkins?"

"S'elp me, God, I'm tellin' the truth, Tamarack Sue's snakin' him in, I saw her."

"Who bumped him?"

"Slim Eliot."

"Where's Slim Eliot?"

"Gone, don't know."

Pete knew that Buller was telling the truth.

CHAPTER X

PETE arose on the morning following his deliverance from the Sheriff, with a feeling akin to buoyancy. He was free, at least from immediate restraint, although the energy with which the Sheriff pursued the trail at the rear of the house indicated the seriousness of his position, so far as the world at large was concerned. Several very definite circumstances aside from his personal freedom added to the revival of his spirits. Judge Stivers had received his note. The fact that no message came with the letter he received unopened from Susie worried him a little; but nevertheless, the Judge, and surely his father, had his declaration of innocence, and would take appropriate action regarding the criminal charge against him. Then, too, Hawkins might not be dead; he could not but feel that the guiding hand of Tam had averted such a tragedy. Yet, her note had been woefully short, as though she had lost interest in everything save the delivery of the letter. This, although addressed to her, had been unopened; another strange matter. But the eternal spirit of hope, the feeling that all is well in the absence of positive proof to the contrary, comforted Pete as he leisurely set

about exploring the various rooms of the connected cabin-like houses, out of one of which he had been so recently delivered.

Buller and little Phil Alguin alone remained of the nest of gangsters who had occupied the premises for the past week. Buller was badly broken. Ever since Susie had come into his life he had brooded over the chances of his being brought to justice for crimes committed long before he entered the service of J. D. Browning, and but for the firm belief that Peter was actually with others, who would immediately avenge his death, Buller would never have allowed him to step out of the rooms alive. As it was, he was wholly at his prisoner's mercy, and made little attempt to conceal the fact. "Little Phil," for reasons best known to Buller, followed the latter's instructions, and seemed more than willing to make what amends were possible while Peter was still with them.

Following breakfast, Pete set about reassembling his pack, remains of which were scattered broadcast about the corner of the room where first he dumped them in his mad rush for the first-aid kit. He found it necessary now to demand several articles of absolute necessity from Buller and Little Phil before he could safely consider the pack complete.

"Mind wisin' us where yer goin'?" Buller asked submissively, yet with a touch of feeling as he observed Pete's evident intention of leaving.

"Don't know myself, exactly," Pete confessed.

"Can't be figgerin' on hittin' the cushions er goin' back to the lights, with a pack," Alguin observed, pointing to Pete's preparations for the trail.

"Well, I started out to work in Hawkins' mine, the Dead Horse. Might as well go through with it, I guess. How far is it from here and how does one get there?"

Peter thought he detected a return of the crafty look in Buller's eye, as the latter answered.

"All hell couldn't get you by the pass, lest you carry an O. K. from J. D."

"Why?"

"Dunno, jest orders, that's all. You'll find all the boys layin' up at the pass that was warmin' the fire here last week; they ain't feelin' any too good about the fifty thousand berries they think yer holdin' out on 'em, either."

"Um, hum," Pete reflected and stood thinking quietly for a moment. "That being the case, guess I'll go back to Moapa, and finish my job in these parts, right off."

At these words a slight frown came over Alguin's face, and he attempted to pass a signal to Bull, but Pete intercepted it.

"Might as well tell me about it, boys. Don't start holding out, already."

"Well," Alguin confessed, "I ain't crazy to have you layin' around Moapa, I don't mind sayin' *I'd* rather you wuz as far up in the mountains as God-a-might'll let you go."

"Me, too," Buller added.

"Well, seems to me that's up to you fellows," Pete replied. "I'm for going, right off. Get me by the pass and that's all I want."

Buller and Alguin accepted the words silently and indicated a desire to hold a consultation. Pete obligingly gave them an opportunity. At length they called to him. "Phil, here," Buller started, "is thinkin' it wouldn't be safe. Mountains get hard this time a year, you mightn't get through. *Then* how about us, see?"

The question hinted of a clumsy trick.

"That's the chance *you're* taking," Pete answered, calmly. "Maybe I won't get through, and if I don't, then the lid's off, and you fellows are in for it. Maybe I will get through, then things stand as they are."

"Yeh," Alguin persisted. "Figgerin' we get you by the pass, how's anybody goin' to know what's happened to you?"

"Don't worry about that, just you two keep *your* fingers out of what happens to me, and things will be fine. Only just don't start—anything."

"I say, let's get him by. He's better up there than hanging around Moapa," Alguin urged, evidently convinced that Pete held the whip hand.

The discussion, more a matching of wits than an attempt to establish a program, at length resulted in an agreement, on the part of Buller and Alguin, to pass Pete by the barrier of the Salmon Tooth guards, and to start him out as best they could toward the Dead Horse Mine.

It was nearly noon when the trio emerged from the building that had held Pete prisoner for so many weary days. At first, the pure joy of walking, the feel of frosty air and the close proximity of towering snow-covered mountains thrilled him. The two submissive gangsters, who walked in single file before him were apparently, he observed, as unused to travel as he himself, as their pace was slow and laborious, a circumstance for which he was duly grateful, for of the three, he alone carried a pack.

It was expected that Salmon Tooth Pass would be reached by sundown, and that the

buildings there would afford shelter for the night.

As the journey progressed, however, the thrill of freedom and new scenery gave way to an irritating sense of ever-increasing inconvenience. The boots, although a week and more old, were nevertheless new and unbroken. They rubbed his heels mercilessly and seemed to grow heavier with every step. Perspiration soon began to trickle in little rivulets beneath his heavy woolen underwear, affording an excellent opportunity for chills when the party halted for short rests along the trail.

The pass proved to be actually nearer than Pete had surmised, and fully an hour before the sun dipped behind the first rugged crags of distant peaks, he beheld the narrow opening in the sheer walls of jagged rocks before him. Even before he could discern the outline of snow-covered houses, that he knew stood at the entrance to the pass, his ears were assailed by the loud roaring of rushing water; a roaring magnified many times in the amphitheatre formed by the sheer mountain walls.

A half hour later, as the trio approached the first of two buildings that stood in the very center of the pass, Buller advanced and spoke to several men who emerged from the first cabin.

Apparently satisfied with what they heard, one of the men beckoned to Pete and Alguin to come up.

Buller stood to one side and pointed to Pete, who came up first.

"This is him, Philip West, friend of mine." Peter was a poor actor and important as the introduction was, his face could not hide his distaste at the expression of "friend," the gangster used. The introduction stopped there, and it was necessary for the man from the cabin to continue it.

"I'm Jenkins, pass foreman," he stated simply, as he extended his hand. Pete grasped it willingly enough, and swiftly appraised his new acquaintance. The man was distinctly unusual, to say the least, and Pete could not be sure that he was making an advantageous trade, in exchanging his late captors for this guardian of Salmon Tooth Pass.

Almost immediately after the meeting, comfortable quarters were provided in Jenkins' own cabin, where Pete made himself as much at home as possible, considering his newness to camp life generally.

The evening meal proved the best he had eaten in weeks. Broiled mountain trout, served with delicious rashers of crisp brown bacon, on a hot platter garnished with watercress; stacks of fluffy biscuits ranged alongside of a

huge can of syrup; baked potatoes, and a combination of corn, beans and peas, blended together with creamy sauce in a way new even to Pete's highly educated palate, brought enthusiastic comment that came straight from his heart.

"Mr. Jenkins, you are certainly to be congratulated on the excellent table you have, away up here," he remarked as he helped himself to biscuits for the third time.

"I'll admit it," replied Jenkins, "and furthermore, I'll say we've got it coming. See old Charley, there?" waving a fork at a rotund Chinaman of uncertain years, who seemed to be glued to a huge wooden bowl in the kitchen. "Had a harder fight getting him than old J. D. had building the bridge up yonder." Jenkins indicated a sturdy span of steel girders that seemed suspended in the air, high above the roaring waters of the stream.

"How interesting! You must tell me about it," Pete replied, taking advantage of his expressed interest to gather another crisp trout from the platter before him. "How did it happen? I'd say he's *worth* more than the bridge."

"Well, it's a long story. He used to be long up in Hawkins' camp, Dead Horse workings. They all hated us like poison up there, when they found out we wanted him.

They made him believe we were running a bogey house of some sort or other down here. I heard about him through some of the boys. They told me how he was the best blamed cook the Saw Tooth Mountains ever had, and I decided I wanted him. Money couldn't buy him. They had him buffaloeed for a while, but I got it into my head I wanted that Chink, and I got him."

"But how did you do it?" Pete was genuinely interested, for the story involved the Dead Horse Mine, an excellent subject to dwell upon later.

"Ha, ha, now you're asking for information. Everyone who eats here, even J. D. himself, has asked me that question. Only Charley and I know the answer though, and old Charley doesn't understand English, do you, Charley?" The old Chinaman had left his bowl to bring in another plate of biscuits.

"No, no, me no talkee ingelish, only melican, Mr. Jenklins, only talkee melican."

"The Dead Horse people must have felt quite badly about it," Pete continued, reluctant to drop the subject. "Suppose they have another one by this time, though—"

"Only three of 'em left up there now. One of them's sick, I hear, that'll leave only two working until you get there. Buller tells me you're going up to join them?" As Jenkins

talked, Pete thought he saw a hint of covert understanding in his eye.

"Yes, I figure on spending the winter up there. But tell me about the cook, have they another one?"

"Guess not, every man for himself. Beats me how they do it. I get into Moapa once in awhile, anyway, but God knows it's bad enough to stick here all winter, even at that."

"Oh, guess I'll come down, occasionally, I like the hills all right enough, what little I've seen of them. But all winter! Whew! Guess I'll come down and go to Moapa with you; how often do you say you go in?"

"Sometimes once a month, sometimes often-er, but say, if you're figurin' on coming back this winter, you hadn't better start at all."

"Why, trail so bad as all that?"

"No, trail's bad of course, but that part is O. K. Our orders are none of the help from further up than Jumbo Point can come out till Spring." Jenkins seemed a little perturbed at Pete's apparent ignorance of orders. For a moment he looked carefully from Buller to Little Phil, who had thus far sat silently by, too much interested with the food, evidently, to talk.

Buller was quick to follow the drift of the conversation, however, and stepped into the breach now quite cleverly. "West's wise all

right," he broke in, "but he's not quite on to just who's who 'round *this* end of the workin's." His foot sought out Pete's beneath the table and kicked it sharply.

"How about the sick bloke, he comin' here?" Alguin asked, following Buller's lead.

"They're on the trail with him now, I think, nothin' much the matter with him, I guess, just stallin' to get into town."

Pete changed the subject, and thereafter the conversation stayed in channels that interested him, but gave him little information.

In spite of his hard afternoon trip, and the thought that he could remove his clothes for the first time in over a week and rest in peace, Pete accepted an invitation to sit in at poker, a pastime that seemed to be innocent enough, as he recalled his total lack of money. Jenkins was equal to the occasion, however, and suggested a small loan, explaining that while J. D. hadn't confirmed Bull's statement, he, West, would probably be on the payroll before long.

Buller, hearing the remark, squirmed uneasily as he contemplated his next visit to J. D. and the time he would have "fixing" Pete's standing there. He comforted himself with the thought that something was due him on the Hawkins deal, at any rate, and took his seat at the game in a much better mood than he had been in for several days. Perhaps the thought

of Tamarack Sue, and the last words he had with her preceding his turning the bumping of Hawkins over to Slim Eliot, had much to do with it. At any rate, as he sat up to the table now he seemed to be more in the mood in which Pete had first seen him at the Gold Nugget, than he had been at any time since then.

Pete's early deduction of Jenkins' character seemed confirmed as he watched him hand out poker chips and square away for the game.

The company was fast, and Pete enjoyed a good game of poker. Alguin and Buller played together, not obviously, but with the cunningness that characterized everything they did. Jenkins apparently knew them, and played accordingly. But as the game wore on, Pete became more and more aware of the deep seated mania for winning that seemed to possess Jenkins. Time after time, as luck favored Pete, Jenkins reached for whiskey, pulled his hat further down over his eyes, and studied the game in deadly earnest. A rivalry that might have taken months to crop out ordinarily, developed between the two men before the game was three hours old. Pete always played his cards, resorting to bluff only occasionally. The pace became hot, and Buller soon demanded a show down, and lost. Then Little Phil, never a good player in a gentleman's game, shoved his last stack to the center of the table and quit.

It was Jenkins' deal, and even though the hour was late, Buller and Alguin kept their seats and watched the rivals fight it out.

Pete took his hand, glanced at it a second, and called for four cards.

Jenkins stood pat, shoving in a half of his stack.

It was Pete's bet. "Raise you fifty," he said evenly. It was the largest bet of the evening and Jenkins hesitated a moment, looked Pete in the face and snapped back, "And I'll raise *you* fifty, that's how I feel about it."

"That goes here, show down," Pete answered calmly, shoving his entire stack to the center. Jenkins answered by shoving in his pile, but the veins in his hands and neck seemed to swell out with pent-up emotion, as he did so.

Pete calmly laid down four aces.

A new look came over Jenkins' face as he displayed three kings, rising the while from his chair.

Pete did likewise, and not a word was spoken. Pete stood full length directly beside the table, and commenced to yawn. But the yawn didn't seem to come natural. He would gladly have given back all of the winnings, he began to think, rather than make an enemy of his host. For a moment Jenkins stood stock still, his eyes running up and down the figure before him. Then suddenly he came directly

up to Pete, and with a sneer on his face bent over and dug his fingers into Pete's boot tops.

For a moment, Pete's heart seemed to stop beating, as he recalled with a start that he had not taken from their original hiding place, the cards he took from Buller over a week ago.

Even before Jenkins' hand could reach the card, Pete saw with his first glance the tell-tale tip protruding above the boot top.

The tension rose quickly to the snapping point; still Pete could utter not a word.

"I guess I've got your number." Jenkins shot the words through his teeth with all the disgust of a man cheated in his own house.

"I haven't used those cards tonight, forgot they were there," Pete answered evenly. "I can explain, Mr. Jenkins."

"Not to me. Good night, Mr. West." Pete noted the undue emphasis on the "West." "Buller will show you where the gang sleeps in the shack outside. Guess I don't want you in here, tonight." Then, turning to Buller, he directed him to escort Pete and his pack to the bunk house, adding, "Come back, you and Alguin, when you are through, I want to talk to you."

Whereupon Pete gathered up his pack, and silently left the room.

If there was one thing on earth Peter despised above another, it was a cheater, and to be

denounced as such, even by so questionable a character as he knew Jenkins to be, cut him to the quick. But if this hurt him, the fact that Jenkins refused even to allow him to make an explanation was worse. Still he knew he could not explain, flanked as he was by Buller and Alguin. Yet the whole affair maddened him.

No sooner was he outside the door than he grasped Buller firmly by the arm and spoke close to his ear. "When you're talking to him, don't forget, 1-3-0-6-6-6. Stall around out here awhile before you go back, both of you. I'm not going to the shack."

CHAPTER XI

CHAFING beneath the sting of humiliation and anger as a result of the dramatic climax of the poker game, Pete stumbled forward and made his way to the trail that seemed to lead into the black gorge ahead of him. As soon as he had cleared the pool of light that streamed from Jenkins' window, he stopped short and listened. He heard the door open—saw Buller enter—and heard the door close. Yet for fully five minutes longer he waited and listened. Then, as no sound greeted his ears, he concluded that Buller was evidently doing his work well,—and he started once more on his journey.

At first he stumbled badly—knocking often into sharp edges of boulders half covered with snow—sometimes tripping completely and sprawling at full length along the trail. But as he fought his way along, his eyes became accustomed to the night. Fortunately, too, the moon was out and occasionally managed to evade mountain crags and towering mountain cedars long enough to illuminate the trail for brief moments.

For over two hours Pete struggled along, devoting all of his fast depleting energy to stay-

ing on the trail. In spite of the roaring waters, several times he halted abruptly and could have sworn he was followed. Not that any distinct noise sounded above the roar of the stream beside him, but rather because of a sudden premonition that possessed him. Twice he turned sharply in his tracks and faced the trail behind him. On both occasions he saw moving shadows, but his better judgment told him there were shadows everywhere, on account of the uncertain light of the moon and he so assured himself,—rather loudly. Strangely enough, his voice and even his reason lacked conviction. His gloved hand sought the holster of his gun—a weapon not unknown to him, although one he had long neglected. Nervously he took it from its holster now and sighted at objects along the trail. He found his gloved fingers were exceedingly awkward about the trigger—and decided to carry the gun in his hand. As he approached a narrow defile, flanked on one side by roaring ice-burdened waters, and by sheer walls on the other, leaving barely passage space for the trail, a sudden idea struck him. He increased his speed, and hurried over the narrow shelf. Almost immediately the defile widened out into its natural size—just as Pete had hoped. Selecting the projecting point of a large boulder for a seat, he quickly jumped from the trail, and watched the nar-

row pass behind. For fully five minutes he waited—and watched. His feet were beginning to freeze from lack of exercise and a chill worse than any of the afternoon's, attacked him. Yet no one had appeared on the trail, and not a sound could be heard above the roaring of the waters. Somewhat relieved he prepared to continue the journey, when two creeping forms, at first resembling weird shadows in the moonlight, rounded the point of rock. Pete sprang to his feet, gun in hand, and with what voice he could summon shouted, "Stand up—who's there?"

For answer the shadows assumed the forms of two great black cats that stood, seemingly astonished, directly on the path before him. Shaking with fright Pete pulled at the trigger of his gun. Twice he shot—the noise sounding woefully weak and ineffective against the roar of the waters. What effect the shots had he could not determine. The forms before him disappeared, however, and although he waited several minutes for their return, they had vanished. Once more on the trail, though, their presence was harshly impressed upon him. Weird screams, first beyond the stream on the right, and then as though answering from the jagged walls on the left, sounded even above the roaring waters.

Pete was completely unnerved by the ex-

perience, although he had no positive fear of attack. There was something uncanny about the journey that worked on his nerves and seemed to exact as much from his strength as the hard physical going along the snow covered trail itself.

He had no idea of the time of night, but he knew by the progress of the moon that he must have been traveling for at least four hours. He tried to guess how far it might be to the Dead Horse Mine, and realized, after all, how little he knew, even of where he was going.

The gorge gradually widened as he progressed into it, the trail becoming fairly broad, and well-defined. Occasionally, he passed what seemed to be intersecting trails, and he experienced some curiosity as to where they led. As the gulch widened he noticed the stream seemed to flow more evenly, and knew before long he must be passing over the stretch of placer ground of which he had heard so much.

This, then, was the ground for which men had risked their lives—wrangled, fought and died! "The yellow curse," he had heard it called by those who lost. "A game—fit only for men," he had heard the winners boast. In spite of his weariness—and at times it seemed to overwhelm him—his thought dwelt long on the significance of the frozen gravel

beneath him. His pulse quickened as he recalled the history of strong men—gold mad—who here fought out between them the right of possession. Then a wave of resentment, a flash of deep rooted hatred raced through his brain as he thought of the present miners—winners of the old days—being ruthlessly cheated and beaten by the very law they themselves had created to end injustice and outlawry. His vision swept beyond the immediate score or so of men affected by the new warfare, and he pictured in his mind the innocent thousands—scattered over all the country—who would sink money, some of them their all, in the hope of gaining riches from this same ground. Only this time they pinned their hopes on the magic of the Salmon River Gold Co., Inc.

His reverie, however, was brought to a rude and sudden conclusion by the piercing wail of a panther, this time in front of him. He had been listening to them for hours, but now in the comparative quiet of the night—with the roar of the stream lost in the gorge far below him—the blood-curdling shriek, like a woman screaming in agony, sent an involuntary shudder through him. No sooner had the echoes of the first long cry faded out than a louder, and closer one, answered from the trail behind.

Pete, shivering and cold, continued his

plodding gait, feeling lonely as he had never felt before, yet conscious of the opportunity to use his gun afforded by the broadening expanse of moonlit ground about him. Three times the panthers screamed, and with the last rending peal, Pete became suddenly aware of a light showing through the window of a small shack directly in front of him. Except for the light, he would have passed the place as a huge misplaced boulder covered with snow.

He hesitated a moment and waited for some sign of activity to follow the appearance of the light. At last convinced that there would be none, he urged his weary body on as briskly as possible and boldly approached the low door of the shack, on which he knocked loudly—calling out at the same time if anyone were in.

Almost instantly the door opened, and Pete found himself confronted by a weazened old woman, apparently an Indian, who held a lamp high in one hand, while she used the other to shade her sunken eyes.

At first Pete's shaggy fur-covered frame, coming so suddenly out of the darkness of midnight seemed to frighten the little old woman. The lamp visibly shook in her hands.

"Please don't be frightened—I'm only a miner, making the trail at the wrong time." Pete apologized, retreating a step or two in

the hope that such a manoeuvre would help calm the shaking figure in the doorway.

"Miner—walk up Gulch—night time—bad."

It seemed to Pete he could hear the parchment like skin on the old woman's neck creak as she shook her head slowly from one side to the other.

"The Banshee wail. Come in—it is the spirit! Ugh. In—miner." For some reason this strange woman of the mountains seemed more afraid of the panther cries than she did of the stranger. As she spoke she lowered her hand from her eyes and made to shut the door.

Pete, seeing her anxiety to shut out as much of the terrifying cry as possible, hurried through the door, and stood, pack still on his back, in the center of the room. The old woman replaced the lamp on the wide sill of the square window. As she did so, Pete observed the room. In the center stood a low table, scarcely large enough to accommodate more than three people comfortably. He noted the absence of a cloth, but observed the near-whiteness of the boards from much scrubbing. In the center of the table a large pot, evidently containing remnants of the evening meal, still remained, surrounded by numerous dishes and cans. The room was permeated with a peculiarly fragrant

odor—emanating from numerous bundles of dried herbs, spices and grass that hung suspended from rafters above, or from long wooden pegs in the ceiling. The fireplace added a peculiar touch to the room; it seemed to form a separate compartment by itself, occupying as it did fully two-thirds of one side of the room, and extending several feet back. A smouldering fire burned there, but it had the appearance of one left from early evening, rather than one intended for the late hours of the night.

With a sigh of relief, Pete unslung the heavy pack and sank wearily into one of three willow back chairs that stood before the fire. For a moment he sat there, his head resting between his hands, a picture of complete exhaustion.

The old woman made a few shuffles about the room before finally settling herself into one of the remaining chairs. She seemed wholly unconcerned at the presence of her visitor, and Pete actually believed she would forget him entirely and drop off to sleep, but for the ever-recurring cries of the two animals without. As the weird echoes of each cry would die down she would sway back and forth in her chair and mutter:

“There’s goin’ to be killin’—there’s goin’

to be killin'—it's the she Banshee's wail. The spirit warnin' there's goin' to be killin'!"

"Is that what their screaming means?" Pete asked sleepily between his hands.

"It's the spirit tellin' of a killin' that's comin'—old Hatty knows. She's heard 'em since long before miners like you come into the hills—they always tell Hatty."

"Hatty." The name suggested something to Pete's drowsy brain. "Hatty." A picture of the prison house and of men talking came to him. It was someone talking to Buller Garret who had used the name. They had been talking about Slim Eliot and the unsuccessful trip to Jumbo Point. "Hatty would have seen Hawkins." He recalled the exact words, as he looked toward the old woman again. "You're a friend of Slim Eliot—aren't you?" he asked.

"Old Hatty—friend of *all men*—friend of many, many men no more in mountains. When she Banshee cries another friend of Hatty leaves mountains. Maybe Slim Eliot—who knows? Only Banshee spirit—maybe strange miner new in hills—who knows? She Banshee calls—someone must answer."

Pete, exhausted as he was, found the effort of talking too much for his drowsy brain and settled back in the comfortable chair and slept, leaving old Hatty swaying back and forth, mut-

tering aloud with every cry from the panthers that now seemed to be making their way slowly up the gorge.

It seemed to Pete he had hardly closed his eyes before the rattle of dishes by his side aroused him. Only his eyelids moved without pain, and even they seemed hot and swollen. His neck seemed entirely out of joint when he tried to turn his head to find the occasion for the rattling of dishes. With an effort he straightened up in his chair—involuntarily uttering grunts of pain as he shifted the position of his limbs. At length he was able to come to his feet and look about him. It was already daylight outside. He must have traveled far into the night, he reasoned, probably spurred on to more than ordinary effort by the cursed panthers that seemed now to be but part of a grotesque nightmare of the night before.

The pot which Pete had observed on the table when he entered, now hung suspended from an iron hook over the red coals of the fire. The aroma of boiling coffee blended peculiarly with the spicy fragrance of the room, and had the effect of giving to Pete's contemplation of the morning meal a very satisfying sensation.

Hatty continued to consider the presence of the stranger in her shack as quite an ordinary

occurrence and evidenced no desire even to glance in his direction, let alone to engage him in conversation.

Observing her apparent lack of interest, Pete sauntered out of the door, and prepared to bathe his face in snow, considering it more effective in stimulating his bearded skin than water would be, even if he bothered to request some of the old Indian woman.

The sight that greeted him as he walked into the open left nothing by way of stimulation for the expected rub of snow. There before him stretched an expanse of mountain scenery that seemed to separate him entirely from his aching limbs and drowsy head as though by the touch of a magic wand. Champagne of the rarest vintage was never more pleasing to his taste than the fresh mountain air now felt to his nostrils and lungs. Even his aching muscles seemed to become promises of new strength, rather than reminders of his late journey as he gazed on the inspiring scene.

He had come out prepared to look upon a tortuous trail that had punished him so relentlessly the night before. Instead he thrilled with pride as he looked down upon the winding gulch through which he had battled his way.

The deep swish of gurgling waters alone broke the charm of the morning stillness. The stream, as though shrinking with fear from the

broad white expanse about it tunneled its way beneath a covering of ice and snow, and only at one place did it show itself. In this lone spot the waters seemed black and cruel, and as he watched them sweep beneath their white covering, his mind pictured the insidious work of the promoters, also carrying on their work of black deception beneath the white veneer of law and glittering paper. He thought of Hawkins—benevolent old sage of the mountains, struggling against hopeless odds to retain his heritage in the hills, even now, in all probability, lying in an untimely grave. From Hawkins his mind shifted to the form of his dream girl—she who had administered to his fevered brow when his overtaxed nerves and body sagged limply by the bedside in the prison house. And then another picture, this time of the same dream girl whose laughing blue eyes were sad and still; whose face, once lovely in its youth, was drawn with lines of worry and care. Hands tender and warm, fit only for acts of mercy and love, in the new mental picture, seemed cold, white and thin. He saw it all as he stood there—gazing into the swirling black waters of the stream. And as he gazed his thoughts turned inward and searched out his very heart. How empty and barren his life had been! How devoid of soul-satisfying achievement! Yet the thought failed, as was

its wont so oft before, to carry with it the bitter pangs of self-condemnation—the pangs that had driven him forth on his mad effort to escape himself. No, he could expose his very soul now it seemed—even to the sacred purity of nature, and feel that all was well. Only the yearning for achievement remained, a yearning that now seemed to take possession of him as nothing else had ever done. He had felt the urge before, but only a slight flush compared with the fever that seized him now. And always before the promptings had sent him searching for he knew not what, while now the fire within pointed the way. He had always lived, the urge seemed to tell him, for this very day, for these very hills that stretched majestically before him; and for service to his fellow men and to the holy cause of purging the mountains of the curse of the wolves of Wall Street, the wildcat promoters who preyed on the credulity of small investors on the one hand—and on the small mine owners on the other. Since his very first night in Moapa he had been thrown against them, it seemed. Coming to Montana as he had in an uncertain effort to run away from his own self-inflicted worries, he found himself forgetting them in contemplation of how he could share the troubles of others, of Hawkins, if he were alive, and of Tam, who seemed so strangely enmeshed in the toils of

the Salmon River Gold Company. The perils and hardships of the past week had done much to erase from his nature what little remained of self-centered interest and concern for his own affairs. In its place had come a yearning for more of the whole-hearted faith and confidence shown him by Brud Hawkins, the man of the hills. He longed for an opportunity to share this man's burdens, which after all seemed to have become wholly his own.

With a long gaze at the wonders of radiant nature in winter time, Pete completed his toilet in the cold soft snow and returned to the little shack, where the welcome aroma of breakfast almost tempted him to pinch the mahogany cheek of the old Indian, by way of appreciation. Instead, he took the place at the table that had been provided for him, and devoted his entire attention to the steaming oatmeal and dried fish that the woman brought smoking hot, with corn biscuits, from the fire.

The meal finished, he set about in as skillful a manner as he could muster, learning what the old Indian knew of the characters he felt must figure in his immediate future.

* * * *

CHAPTER XII

FOR long weary days, days that merged into weeks, Pete bent over his work in the Dead Horse Mine. Finding on his arrival there only two men, both discontented and shiftless drifters, he accepted the burden of carrying on the largest share of the work himself.

He found the workings to be little more than a rather well developed prospect with one main tunnel following vein matter for probably one hundred yards into the slope of the mountain. This tunnel ended abruptly, however, and Ham, a seasoned old miner, who had long since lost interest in everything save the avoidance of starvation, had started Pete digging what he termed a cross cut, a sort of new tunnel, directly at right angles to the old one, insisting that Pete wheel the muck from the new diggings into the space between its opening and the face or end of the old tunnel.

Before many weeks had passed Pete became hardened to his work, and took great pride in the bulge of muscles that made even his oversized flannel shirts seem small. There were no regular hours for work, the men usually starting early in the morning and working until they had driven in the new tunnel or cross cut

an allotted distance. If the "going was good" as the men said, it meant that much more leisure; if the work was hard, and it usually was, owing to unusual formations of the rock encountered, the men continued working longer.

Once each week a runner came from Salmon Tooth Pass, checking up the work done at the mine, and bringing to the workers food, clothing, old magazines, and such luxuries as the men might send for from the commissary below. At first Pete made no effort to obtain information from his companions, deciding it would be best first to earn as much of their confidence as possible. The wisdom of his policy was demonstrated with the first visit of the runner whom Pete observed talking covertly and at some length with Ham. That they were talking about him, he had no doubt as he quietly observed the ill-concealed glances and motions of the two men. However, he noticed a much better and more friendly attitude on the part of the two miners toward him after the runner had left. For some time he wondered how Buller had squared matters with Jenkins and others to whom he was undoubtedly accountable. A remark passed quite casually by Ham, in which he mentioned "breaking rock" with a significant smile, cleared his mind on this point. He recollected that the Gold Company seemed to specialize in having fugitives from justice in its

service. Buller had apparently used his first-hand knowledge of this policy, in arranging a safe berth for Pete. Nevertheless, Pete had little doubt that after all he was still virtually a prisoner, and that all concerned knew him to be Peter Alden and not Philip West.

Before long the two miners seemed to consider Pete one of themselves, and talked freely with him. Little by little he picked up odds and ends of the crooked career of the Salmon River Gold Company. Several circumstances, which had puzzled him deeply were explained. He had never before been able to understand why practically all of the old placer miners, men independent and prosperous in their own way, with flumes, shovels and pans, had been willing to relinquish their holdings to Browning's Company. Kloch, Ham's companion, innocently enough furnished an excellent explanation. Pete deducted that through some means or other, he, Kloch, had title at one time to a bit of placer ground in the Gulch below. Browning, Kloch explained, had made the same offer and terms with him as with all the others. Pete, showing unusual interest in the transaction, asked to see the contract in the matter, and Kloch proudly and obligingly furnished him with it.

Pete found one important provision in the paper that interested him profoundly. A para-

graph providing that in addition to a consideration of stock, the Company specifically agreed to erect a huge dredge on the placer property consolidated by them, and to have it in operation by the last day of the coming January. Even the specifications of the dredge were set down in detail. Pete knew, even from his limited experience in mining, what a tremendous outlay of capital the project involved.

From this point on he pressed his search for further information, and once he had been able to engage the runner in lengthy conversation. From him he learned that even the workmen at the pass were aware of something decidedly wrong at headquarters. There had been rumors of trouble with some of the old placer miners, and the guards at the pass were finding it more and more difficult to keep men from entering the gulch. For some time the story of a landslide had sufficed, but lately new excuses had to be made nearly every week.

His great opportunity came, however, one afternoon nearly a week following his talk with the runner. On this day, Pete and his two fellow-workmen were surprised by an unexpected visit from a group of six men, all strangers to Pete.

Two of them were obviously laborers, brought along to carry what equipment the other four might require for the journey in

addition to the small haversacks they themselves carried.

Pete was as much impressed by the sudden appearance of the four clean-shaven carefully groomed visitors as though he himself had always lived in the hills.

The visitors proved to be J. D. Browning, himself, distinguished from the rest of the party by the soft pink skin of his plump face and the pudgy white hands that nervously tugged at his well groomed mustache. Another of the party, one constantly in his immediate proximity, Pete found to be a Mr. Sharpe. As Pete carefully took in every detail of his features he marveled at the appropriateness of the name. A small oblong head, from the half bald portion of which steam arose in a thin vapor as the owner removed his fur cap, seemed to converge into a long beak-like nose with eyes on either side intended apparently for no other purpose than to emphasize the presence of the combined nose and forehead. The pallor of his face, too, blended perfectly with the dirt-flecked snow about the entrance of the tunnel.

Both Browning and Sharpe snapped out questions at the other two who stood with legs wide apart, rolling and unrolling numerous blue-prints that emerged in astonishingly large quantities from folds in their pockets. It soon became apparent that one was Peleg Demons,

Company engineer, and the other the company lawyer, whose name Pete finally learned was Houston.

After much sweeping of arms and comparison of notes, interspersed with words Pete could not catch, the visitors finally folded their documents and advanced into the entrance of the tunnel.

Demons called loudly for candles, then grabbed the ones offered by Pete with the contempt and over-bearing manner of a man passing on to inferiors abuse and derision he himself is accustomed to receive.

What happened inside the tunnel Pete could not know. But at the end of an hour the four men came out puffing and perspiring from exercise more strenuous than mere walking.

Another conference took place at the mouth of the tunnel and this time Pete saw to it that he kept within hearing distance.

A blacksmith shop, or rather a crude shelter over a forge, used for heating dull steel picks and drills, faced in such a way toward the particular spot near which the four men stood, that the sound of their voices carried perfectly. Pete had discovered this listening post quite by accident, during his first few days at the mine, and had in fact used it frequently for the very purpose it now served him. Pete listened eagerly for the expected words and was soon rewarded.

Browning, apparently addressing Demons, talked first.

"Well—there's this much about it, Demons, *we* can't move that muck in there ourselves. These fool men you've got up here are apparently working. Rather unusual, but nevertheless we've got to look at that pay stuff you say is in there."

"But none of the three know it's there," the engineer replied, "don't you think it's dangerous? Barclay, the one who ran into it, swears he covered it up at once, and told no one. He's been where he can't talk for weeks now."

"Well—we can't keep it covered up, forever," Sharpe broke in irritably. "Houston here says he's gone as far as *he* can in fixin' the title—it's as much our mine now as it ever will be unless you fellows can produce that Brud Hawkins, or bring him back to life or something."

Browning turned sharply to Houston, who, so far as Pete could make out had said little or nothing since his arrival.

"Do you think it's safe to open her up, Ern?" he asked.

The lawyer had plainly been asked this same question many times before, judging from the irritable manner in which he snapped out an emphatic, "No."

At this Sharpe gave way to a tirade of abuse, cursing himself for getting mixed up in the deal first of all, then including Browning and Demons in his denunciation, and then ending by declaring that if Houston couldn't figure some way of releasing the title to the accursed mine, the whole project, Houston included, could go to hell.

Browning rose to the occasion, and as his partner lost control of himself Browning now gave the appearance of complete mastery of the situation, and of himself most of all, as he answered Sharpe:

"Now, Bill, forget it. You don't mean that. If this thing blows up you know and I know and Houston and Demons know there's only one place we can *all* go. And that place ain't hell, exactly,—it's worse. It's got bars on the doors!"

Such a statement, coming as it did from the leader, caused a painful silence to fall over the entire group. Browning quietly tugged at his mustache as he watched the effect of his words. Sharpe pouted sullenly, and ground a cigarette to powder beneath the heel of his boot. Houston alone batted not an eye, and gave no sign of emotion of any kind.

"A fine crowd," Pete mused to himself, as he took in the silent four from the tail of his eyes.

Peleg Demons, weakest of the lot, was first to break the silence.

"Is—is—it—so bad as *that*?" he faltered, looking earnestly at Browning.

"Oh, hell, Peleg, don't come with that innocent stuff now—you know what you've done to half the hold-outs you've man-handled. How many are at the bottom of old Dan Morgan's shaft? *You'd* be lucky to *go* to jail."

Demons winced at the words and paled perceptibly, as he answered, "Well—I'm for doing *anything* to keep 'er from busting—just say the word."

Sharpe, apparently recovered from his sudden temper, long enough at least to find his voice, lit another cigarette, and talked between puffs.

"Come, boys, no use talking this way," he urged in a conciliatory manner. "This thing isn't going to bust. None of us needs to worry if we stick together and play the game. But we've got to take chances, we've simply got to. Now tell me again, Houston, just where do we stand, and for heaven's sake talk. Let's get this thing straight, once for all. Where do we stand without this stuff here?" From the flick of ashes sent in the direction of the tunnel, the "here" referred to the mine.

"We have two months to install a quarter-million dollar dredge on our placer ground, or

we lose it," Houston replied. "That's that. You and your Wall Street concern have sold more than that valuation of stock, but our concern has embezzled the money and lost it to some other crowd of Wall Street pirates."

"Not that part of it, Ern," Sharpe interrupted. "I mean how do we stand on the contracts and things?"

It was Sharpe's turn now to join the panic-stricken Demons.

Silent Ern Houston continued: "And, if we don't make good the money to the stockholders, or build our dredges, it's jail for all of us—maybe more for some," he added, looking furtively from Demons to Browning.

No one listening to Houston's talk could fail to get the full meaning of his words or to doubt the seasoned judgment behind them as he continued:

"We have one chance of getting out with our skin and with money. That chance is at the bottom of this tunnel. If Demons' story of a strike is right, we've got a chance. I'm no miner, and I don't know. So far as the title to this property is concerned we don't own it. It stands in the name of Brud Hawkins. We ordered Hawkins put away and Buller Garret says Slim Eliot did it." It seemed to Pete that Houston mentioned the deed with distinct relish. "If Hawkins is dead, and doesn't come

to life, I've got the legal end of getting the title fixed. If he does turn up, well, that's something else again."

Browning took up the subject where Houston left it. "Now Hawkins never did know what he has here, that much is certain, isn't it, Demons?" he asked.

Demons assured him it was.

"Now, that being the case," Browning continued, "I agree with Sharpe. Let's bring a crew up here and get at this gold. Let's take a chance on the legal end—we've *got* to take a chance somewhere."

"Why not make it appear that the stuff is coming from some other mine—we can get a hole in the ground somewhere for a dummy," Demons suggested.

"Sounds reasonable," Browning replied, "anyhow, you will be here to fix that. And now, boys," turning to the others, "we're safe, if nobody talks. I'll put Garrett, Jenkins and the whole crowd on the lookout for strangers. They think they've been on the job before. They will *know* it when they get through this time. Jenkins is in the gap. *Nobody* on this side will get further than him. Then there's Buller on the outside, and something's got him smelling for strangers lately like a lost dog. Won't hurt to jog him up a bit, at that. Then there's old Hatty in the gulch. She'll spot

anybody we don't. She tipped me on the last one. He's here now, but he's all right, we can send him up anytime we want to. Long as he's working here he's alright. Rocks fall pretty bad in the tunnel, anyhow, don't they, Demons?" He raised his brows to the engineer significantly as he asked the question.

"Just as you say," Demons answered.

"Well," Browning continued, "guess that's our line up. Houston here don't say much, but I know him. Even if the old Gopher *does* put in an appearance, and Eliot's made ghosts out of dozens like him, he'd have a hell of a time getting his legal stuff fixed up, eh, Houston?"

The lawyer seemed pleased at the implied flattery of his chief and smiled meekly.

"Well, I'll say we're air tight, boys, we're air tight. Now let's get the men in here, and see what's under that muck in the tunnel. Demons, if the stuff isn't there—" Browning's look must have finished the sentence, as Pete heard no more.

The conference thus ended, Pete, along with his two companions and the two new workmen, were ordered to dig at least a passageway over the top of the pile of stone and muck that had been piled for fully fifty feet in front of the face of the tunnel and were prom-

ised pay for an extra shift if they could have it cleared before midnight.

After several hours of hard labor Pete was one of the first to plunge his shovel into loose dirt directly before the base of the tunnel's abrupt end. He alone, of the five workmen, knew why the debris in front of the tunnel was being cleared away, it seemed. Pete, however, realized full well that he was nearing the end of the work and bent anxiously over the new rock he uncovered. For fully a minute he stopped, sheer wonder holding him motionless, as his eyes traveled over the white and gold of the ore before him.

"Well, what you got so all fired interestin'?" the voice of Demons sounded over him, and before he could answer, he felt strong hands close over his shoulders. A second more and he was sprawling on his back in the muck of the tunnel, Demons taking his place before the golden treasure, picking here and there with a little hand tool at the vein. At length he gathered up the fragments he had picked off and ordered Pete to precede him out of the tunnel, calling to the other workmen to follow.

Something told Pete, as he made toward the mouth of the tunnel, that he was already slated as number one on the casualty list of the Dead Horse Mine.

CHAPTER XIII

AS Pete and Demons followed by the other miners made their way out of the tunnel Pete took rapid stock of the situation in which he found himself. He could easily imagine what the sight of real gold would do for Sharpe and Browning; and he knew only too well the influence these men exerted over hirelings such as Demons, Houston, Garret and others.

As he stumbled along over the uneven floor of the tunnel he thought of Hawkins, pioneer of the hills who for years had struggled against all manner of hardships for this very day when his judgment would be vindicated, vindicated by the discovery of gold in quantities that probably even he had never dreamed of. He recalled the amused smile that played over Hawkins' face when he related how friend and foe alike had derided him for spending his life searching for gold in the hills when it lay all around him in the placer ground of the gulch below. What a queer twist of fate it was, that now brought forth gold in this same despised "gopher hole," to bring ruin to the same placer miners who had so long made Hawkins the butt of jests and good-natured fun, and, Pete doubted not, oftentimes abuse.

He found comfort in the thought that Hawkins might not be dead after all; that he might still come back to the fruits of victory! Yet even as he thought it the words of Browning sounded again in his ears. "Even if he does come back, he'll have a hell of a time getting his legal affairs fixed up," he had said.

"Certainly a man's job this time," Pete muttered to himself as all of the complications of the situation came to him. He thought of Moapa and of the chances Browning might have obtaining justice in a legal fight there; but Buller, Little Phil Alguin, and a dozen other faces he remembered all too well, loomed even larger in his mind's eye than Moapa itself, and he dismissed the thought. Then, as though conserving even brain power, his thoughts retreated from the far-stretched possibility of a legal battle in Moapa and roamed again in the hills. Here, too, they came to a sudden and abrupt ending, brought up sharp at the Salmon Tooth Pass by the cabin of Jenkins. Then, scurrying back along the trail just as he himself had done, they dwelled for a moment at the little snow-covered shack of Indian Hatty. Even she in the service of Browning! He thought the thing incredible, yet he knew it to be true! And as he pictured further the fight ahead, intangible and indefinite as it was, he knew it would be the supreme test of his manhood; and uncon-

sciously the consequences of losing, mingled with his thoughts. Invariably they carried him back to San Francisco. He smiled as he pictured Judge Stivers, and how he must have hopped up and down with excitement on receipt of the mysterious letter written from the prison shack! What were his father and the Judge doing? Something! Most assuredly something! He had always marveled at the super-knowledge of human nature the Judge possessed, and at his great ability to strike quickly and accurately right at the heart of things.

Lights at the mouth of the tunnel at last loomed up large before him and his train of thoughts soon were lost in the excited exchange of words and ejaculations that met his ears. Before he could fully collect his wandering thoughts again, Demons, rushing past him, called excitedly, then came back into the tunnel with Browning and Sharpe hurrying on behind. The miners, none of whom had shared with Pete the sight of naked rich gold now stood about for a few moments expressing only a mild interest in the work, before hurrying off to the bunk room in the long low house as though they feared a shortage of sleeping accommodations might develop.

As they passed him Pete scanned their faces in the forlorn hope that some one among them might impress him as a possible confidant. But

Browning or Demons, whoever it was that hired them, was a master at selecting men, for neither of the two new men satisfied Pete as he turned dejectedly from his vantage point, and made to follow the last of the men to the house. As he turned, he bumped full into Ern Houston, and he knew from the look the latter gave him that his actions had been closely watched. He apologized profusely, but the thin slit of a mouth in the sphinx-like face of Houston did not open; instead, the pearl handle of a revolver showed ominously from inside the flap of the lawyer's coat. Feeling more than ever the danger of his position, Pete lost no time in seeking his bunk where he lay, completely dressed, thinking hard and awaiting developments.

Before long, possibly an hour or so he imagined, he heard sounds of men stamping snow or mud noisily from their boots on the little porch that served as an entrance to the bunk house. Soon Browning, Sharpe and Houston entered, preceded by Demons who carried two kerosene lamps. Inside the room the party hesitated, as Browning's eyes swept about, dwelling at some length on the men occupying bunks along the wall.

"Hell, can't talk in here," he said, as he turned an inquiring look on Demons. "Isn't

there a shack or something where we can talk privately?"

"There's the old dining room," Demons replied, "nobody in there. Got no cook up here any more. Let's go there."

The party acted on the engineer's suggestion, and followed him through a door that led from the sleeping quarters to the adjoining kitchen and dining room, where they entered immediately into an animated discussion, fragments of which drifted into the bunk house. Twice Pete heard Sharpe mention "high grading"—a term he himself had come to know thoroughly through the daily swapping of yarns with Ham and Kloch. He quickly surmised the meaning of the words now, as he pictured the men gouging deep into the golden treasure of the mine, in frantic haste to get as much of the spoils as possible before any complications of ownership, remote as they were, might arise.

"Fake up a shell for a dredge on the claims," was another expression that brought a weight of meaning to him as he lay, straining every faculty in an effort to catch each word. "Dirty vandals," he cursed, as these words came to him. "Not contented with stealing thousands from stockholders you now would steal the miners' gold and then build only a faked shell in place of the dredge you agreed to erect on their placer claims!"

At length the talking quieted down—someone uttered a loud satisfied yawn, and suggested going to bed. Following this the light reappeared in the room, where for several minutes Demons and Houston busied themselves dragging wire bottomed bunks toward the narrow door that led into the dining room. An hour later Pete heard loud snores and meaningless muttering of words in dreams, and he knew the men about him were fast asleep.

Stealthily he pushed the blankets to the floor beside him. Then, making certain of his gun, he crept silently over the side of the bunk to the floor. Carrying his boots in one hand, and as much of his pack equipment as he could safely manage in the other, he stole toward the door. Several times during even the short distance he had to travel over the rough spruce boards he stopped and listened attentively. But all seemed well, and in a moment more he found himself outside the building with his stocking feet sinking deep into soft fluffy snow. Great flakes floated silently down on his face as he searched in vain through the intense darkness for a trace of the moon. Making his way cautiously through the snow he found the sheltered boards of the blacksmith shop where, by the aid of candle lights, he spread the canvas of his pack on the bare ground floor and took careful inventory of his equipment. Twice he

stole back into the sleeping quarters, each time emerging with additional articles of wearing apparel; ammunition for his own and another gun he managed to secure, besides a quantity of dried meat and canned food taken from long boxes of provisions that had been kept as emergency rations. Quickly, but with extreme care, he rolled his pack and fitted it to his back. Apparently satisfied with the way it felt he unslung it again from his back, snuffed his candles, putting the two he had been burning together with a dozen or so others in his pocket before he circled several times about the little shelter. Realizing that darkness and falling snow meant as much to him as liberty itself, he finally placed the pack on top of the shack, tightened his belt, and securely tied the laces of his high leather boots. Then with the stealth of an Indian, he entered the sleeping quarters once more where with heart pounding fast, and every nerve a tingle, he crawled directly across the floor of the sleeping quarters, and on into the dining room beyond.

In the intense darkness he bumped his head full into a bunk that stood just inside the door. For a moment he halted breathlessly, his hand on the holster of his gun ready for instant action. But the occupant of the bunk, whoever he was, slept deeply, and except for a hasty

turning beneath his blankets, gave no sign of being disturbed.

Inch by inch Pete made his way from bunk to bunk, searching deftly with his hand for clothes and haversacks. The bunk against which he had bumped yielded a goodly supply, and as he felt the many folds and soft wool texture of the coat, he knew it belonged to Demons. With a thrill of satisfaction he felt the long folds of blue prints in the pockets. Placing the coat beneath him to further deaden the sound of his knee bones on the board floor he proceeded to search for the remaining bunks. For fully an hour he continued his desperate work until at length he had in one pile practically all of the clothing, boots and hats included, that the entire party possessed.

Congratulating himself on his initial success, he repeated the venture in the sleeping quarters of the crew, working much quicker than in the room beyond.

It was only a matter of minutes in the blacksmith shop until all papers and documents found in the confiscated clothing entered the pockets of his own. So far, his plan was working well. But the fact that every one of the sleepers kept his gun beneath his pillow disturbed him. He had hoped, though it took him all night, to secure these also. Then, too, there were electric flashlights among them and

he bit his lip and considered again going into the rooms to renew his search.

Reason, however, overcame the zeal of the moment. He abandoned the idea of further search, and set about the final and by far the most dangerous act of his plan.

Tying all of the stolen clothing in a large bundle, which he threw into the center of the tunnel, he made certain once again that his own pack was secure on the roof of the little shop, and prepared for a final and extremely important visit to the bunk house. This time he made for the kitchen of the dining room, crawling with even greater caution than before. Two of the bunks were passed and he began to breathe easily, when the occupant of the third one suddenly sat bolt upright and stared quickly about the room. Pete hugged the floor and let his body and limbs sag limply; even a creak of a knee joint would mean his finish now!

Someone directly over his head spoke:

"Matter Ern?" It was Browning's voice.

The words sounded strangely loud in the still room.

"Nothing. Tho't I heard someone moving. Guess I was dreaming."

Pete recognized Houston's voice, and heard the lawyer yawn and settle back into the blankets. Pete breathed a prayer of thankfulness at the sound, only an instant later to have his

heart jump as though to leave his chest entirely, as Browning sat upright.

"Sleepin' rotten myself," he muttered. "Guess I need a cigarette."

With an agony of suspense, Pete heard Browning's hands rasp over the floor in evident search for his coat.

"Funny where my damn coat's gone to," he remarked, as Pete heard him move closer to the edge of the bed. "Guess I'll have to light up and look for it."

Houston turned on his side. "Oh, don't do that," he grunted sleepily. "Here—my coat's right near my pillow. No use wakin' the whole crew up—here."

Quick as a flash, Pete searched his own pockets and produced a cigarette and matches. He was none too soon, for the shadowy form of Browning's outstretched hand was not twelve inches from him when he met it with the cigarette and match.

Browning's fingers closed upon them. "Thanks, Ern," he mumbled, placing the cigarette to his mouth. "You're always a handy man."

Then striking the match with a thumb nail he made a cup of his hands, lit his cigarette, and threw the dead match away.

"Thanks?" Houston questioned in surprise. "What are you thanking *me* for? I can't find my

coat either." Pete trembled as he heard the speaker fumbling about with his hands in the darkness.

"Oh, well, hell, I've got the cigarette, anyhow, Ern," Browning grunted between puffs, "I'm thanking you for *that*, I don't want to smoke your coat. You damn lawyers—a man's even got to *specify* what he's thanking you for!"

This ended the dialogue, and none too soon, for to Pete's excited senses it seemed that everyone in both rooms was turning and twisting at once.

He felt as though he had been holding his breath all night as now, with the talking evidently over, he took a quiet, slow breath of relief and settled down to rest while Browning smoked. What seemed to him to be hours afterwards he noted the even regular breathing of Houston, and heard Browning lean far over the side of the cot and extinguish the butt of his cigarette on the floor.

The coast clear once again Pete continued his stealthy maneuvering across the floor, this time gaining the kitchen without further interruptions.

Taking a half empty flour sack from a bin he groped gingerly about in the large sawdust filled powder box for the dynamite he knew was there. Stick after stick he tucked carefully

into the flour, thinking that by doing so he might add to the safety of carrying the dangerous stuff about in the darkness, although from its frozen condition he felt that this precaution was unnecessary. With nearly two dozen of the sticks safely tucked away he began his perilous journey back through the rooms. He thought the darkness about him was already beginning to pale and he quickened his movements. On gaining the door to the outer sleeping quarters, he breathed easily again and, straightening to his full length, proceeded with wide stealthy strides into the falling snow.

He lost no time now as morning was indeed breaking. But for the heavy falling snow it would already be light, he feared, as he made hastily for the mouth of the tunnel. Grasping the huge bundle of stolen clothing, and with lighted candle affixed to his miner's hat, he rushed hurriedly on, not stopping until the very end of the tunnel was reached. With trembling hands he began at once making hole after hole along both sides of the tunnel and along its roof above his head, continuing the work until he had covered a distance of nearly sixty feet.

Feeling that he could spare no more time with such work, he set about placing dynamite. He had assisted Ham with what little powder work had been done, and he remembered now

how easily dynamite could freeze beyond the point of usefulness. With a pang of sudden disappointment he now anxiously felt the frozen sticks, and knew it would be impossible to use them until they were thawed out. For a moment he stood there calling desperately upon the resourcefulness that had favored him so generously throughout the night. It did not fail him now. Without a moment's further hesitation he placed the bundle of clothing against the wall of the tunnel, and touched a lighted candle to it. Then, as soon as the flames became sufficiently strong, he deliberately placed his bag of death and destruction over them realizing full well as he did so that any moment he might be blown into eternity. Nevertheless he kept his post, and felt anxiously of the fast-softening sticks within the bag, as minute after minute slipped by. In deadly earnest he held them there, grimly grinding his teeth together until the muscles of his jaws fairly bulged beneath the skin!

Cold beads of perspiration trickled down from his forehead before he yielded and consented to place the softened sticks between the small clefts he had made in the tunnel. Priming and fusing was but the work of a moment; then, after cramming the remaining sticks into his pockets, he touched the candle to the master fuse—and started a mad rush for the pale day-

light without. It was the first time he had ever used dynamite alone and on his own responsibility, and for aught he knew the deadly concussion of the blast would sound ere he covered half the distance to the blacksmith shop—and safety.

Early in his mad flight his candle blew out. His heavy boots hindered rather than helped him as he tried desperately to make speed and yet keep his footing. One bad fall on the rocky floor with a stick of the powder in his pockets striking under him and he knew he would never hear the blasts behind. Fifty—seventy-five—one hundred yards; he slackened his pace. Perhaps he hadn't prepared the blasts right after all, he suddenly thought. Then, as though ashamed of the near panic he was in, he even slowed down to a walk before finally emerging into the entrance way of the tunnel. And well he did! Premonition was certainly aiding resource now, for no sooner was he in the short wind-break that formed the entrance to the tunnel, than he heard loud curses emanating from the bunk houses. Dropping quickly to his hands and knees, he sneaked rapidly forward and peered over the embankment. One look, and he flattened suddenly on the ground. There on the porch and in the doorway of the bunk house was a sight strange to behold.

Sharpe standing in his underwear, with naked feet buried in fully six inches of snow, tails of his flannel shirt whipping grotesquely in the wind, was wildly thrashing the air with a gun, calling loudly the while for all manner of accursed thieves to come out and fight. The fuzzy hair on the back of his head stood up in bold relief over his bald pate, and his huge nose seemed actually to dilate with anger.

Back of him stood Browning, attired even as was Sharpe himself, except that the flapping shirt tails were missing. The flabby, pointed paunch of his stomach that fitted so well in street attire, seemed woefully misplaced and ridiculous now as it strained at the buttons of his union suit. Other men were peering from windows on both sides of the door, and some even pranced about within the doorway itself as though anxious to break past Browning and stand in the cold snow with Sharpe.

The contrast between his recent rendezvous with death, and the queer antics of the men before him, made Pete choke with laughter. His only desire in life at the moment it seemed, was to rise to his feet and whoop from sheer delight. However, thoughts of the ominous moments to come and the expected thunder of the blast behind, impelled him to action of a far different kind.

Grasping a gun from either hip he sprang

suddenly up and sent a volley of bullets whistling above the confused heads in the doorway and windows of the bunk house. Then, feeling assured of the effect of his volley, he looked a moment upon the wild scene it caused, and rushed quickly to the blacksmith shop by the tunnel side, slung his pack to his shoulders, and rushed off into the snow-storm, and down the trail toward Salmon Tooth Pass. Scarcely had he turned his back to the mine, however, when came a deafening roar coupled with a blast of wind which literally swept him from his feet. The very earth, it seemed, shook beneath him.

Pete smiled grimly as the echoes reverberated about him. Then gathering himself to his feet he plunged boldly and unafraid down the snow-covered, treacherous trail of the mountain side.

Hours afterward, the half naked prisoners in the bunk house heard still another deafening roar far down in the gully below—and they knew that Jenkins would no longer be telling a lie when he posted signs reading:

“Salmon Tooth Pass closed — landslides blocking the Trail.”

* * * *

CHAPTER XIV

DAY after day Pete wallowed through snow and braved the cold blasts that swept upon him like myriad spears of ice over the mountain tops. Each day found him seeking a new vantage spot nearer and nearer the high bluffs that overhung the Salmon River Valley, and every night as he lit his campfire, he stood long before it making signals as best he could by aid of blankets, hoping against hope that Tam, wherever she was, might see them.

Time and again he was forced back into the gulch below in search of food, often finding it necessary to spend many hours of daylight before he could shoot a single fish, or start up a rabbit or fool-hen from the snow-covered trees of the bottom land. Twice he was compelled to visit the shack of the old Indian, each time lying carefully under cover to make certain that no lurking gangster awaited within the cabin. On both occasions he was forced by necessity to take large supplies of meal, coffee, sugar and salt; but he was careful to leave money behind, knowing full well that the sly old woman would have no difficulty in replenishing her supplies when the runner again made his way up the gulch from Jenkins' commissary

at the pass. His second trip to the shack, however, was his last one. All along the trail he found undeniable evidence that many men had gone up the canyon toward the Dead Horse Mine. His shaggy beard growing full into a shock of hair that fell in masses from his head, shook with laughter as he pictured the last sight he had had of the four conspirators, and their men. How long they remained before help came he could not know; yet hardly a day passed but he listened long for signs of work on the huge mass of rock he had blasted across the narrows of the gulch. So far, they had not begun work upon it, but with the dispatching of workmen to the Dead Horse, (and he could think of no other meaning in the tracks on the trail by Hatty's shack), he feared that the blasted rock, too, would soon be cleared away.

On the morning of the tenth day Pete arose stiff and cramped from cold, and busied himself over a meager breakfast of boiled corn and coffee.

He had never tired of the glories of early morning, especially when the sun rose clear and bright, sending its magic touch, like the brush of a master painter, over the vast, rolling mountains about him. The very greatness of the picture it unfolded gave to him a sense of se-

curity and safety, in spite of his intense loneliness.

Now, as he sat before his breakfast fire after ten days of constant struggle with the elements, the grandeur of the panorama seemed to suggest a new and different meaning. For the first time, it seemed, the overwhelming odds against which he waged his lone struggle stood out in the very vastness of the wilderness about him. For the first time, too, since he plunged into the snow-covered mountains, he began to question his plan of action, and to wish he had gone to Moapa to fight his enemies where he knew they were. Only the deep-rooted conviction that Hawkins was still alive and must be found, and that Tamarack Sue was with him, somewhere in the very hills about him, prevented his immediate departure for the pass. As he contemplated such a journey, he pictured his meeting with Jenkins and Buller and perhaps with Demons or even Browning himself, and he unconsciously expanded his muscle-ribbed chest and felt the vigor of new strength course through his veins. What a pleasure it would be to meet them, one or all! He craved an opportunity to test his new-born strength; to meet the curs of this murderous gang and crush them beneath his heel!

Nor was the temptation to quit his vigil on the hills and carry the battle to his enemies

wholly without support of reason. For ten nights he had built fires and signaled; he had built them on vantage points from which his eye could sweep the mountains for miles, and the valley below even to Moapa itself, yet he had received not even a hint of answer. He thought long and hard, first favoring his impulse to be among men, then yielding finally to the old arguments of reason that had sent him on his present mission ten days before.

As he sat and pondered thus the sun burst forth with a flood of light that made even the distant peaks seem close and friendly. There had been no snow for two days, and Pete could see his trail of the day before running for hundreds of yards down the mountain side. It was the first time he had left a trail and the full significance of the thought came over him with a sudden rush, as he recalled that always before snow had fallen, at least sometime during each twenty-four hours. Even the tracks of many men by the Indian's cabin were half filled with it, and it was still snowing when he had left there, he recalled. Then came a premonition, a feeling, odd enough, that he might not have to go to the valley below, after all, to meet his enemies! With a burst of sudden energy, he rolled his pack securely, threw it over his shoulders, and proceeded eagerly to the task of

making a trail more to his liking than the one he had left the night before.

With the deftness and assurance of a native mountaineer coupled with the cunningness of a hunted man, he made his way, circling this way and that, directly over high points that stood fearlessly above the rest, and plunging through little clumps of stunted mountain cedar, always working with a definite object in view, until he reached a location that seemed to suit his fancy.

As the afternoon approached he set about preparing camp for the night. For the first time he selected a spot well hidden from view, yet one from which his eye could sweep several of the high spots of his recent trail.

As the evening shadows gathered, he felt more and more convinced that someone was on his trail. Not that he had positive evidence; but because it was such an obvious way for Browning to wreak vengeance upon him. He wondered what type of man would be selected for such a mission. Would it be one who would steal upon him in the night and end matters quickly and silently, while he slept?

As darkness slowly settled over the mountains, Pete became more and more convinced of the nearness of someone on his trail, and with the thrill of near-combat in his veins, he threw his provident scrimping of rations to the winds,

and set about preparing a meal fit for the role he hoped soon to fill. With almost reckless abandon he cut deep into his precious supply of fat bacon, leaving scarcely enough for a morning meal. Into melted snow water he poured handful after handful of finely ground corn, stirring it as it boiled with the whittled end of a cedar spoon. Then came the most reckless act of all, the opening of a can of preserved fruit. How carefully had he cherished this delicacy against the day when he could serve it, together with a meal of his own cooking, to Hawkins and Susie!

As he finished the meal, there beside the dying embers of the camp-fire, he looked long and far into the dull red of the setting sun. What a short cry it was after all, he thought, from man as God intended him, to man as he himself had been only a few short months before! Now, even as he toyed with his guns, cold, deadly reminders of imminent battle, his soul seemed satisfied and for a moment in accord with nature unspoiled by man! Yet only a day before, it seemed, he had been tossing about on an unnatural sea of conflicting emotions, coming he knew now from the ever-increasing struggle of man living on man rather than nature. True, all of the intrigues and villainies of depraved manhood were within a stone's throw of his very camp-fire, and as he

slowly limbered the hammers of his guns he knew full well that with all the purity of nature about him his very life, for the present at least, was devoted to a bitter struggle against his fellow-men. Nevertheless, it was this very thought that brought home to him the full significance of the slumbering peacefulness of the almighty greatness about him. Even as the storm-wrecked mariner looks hopefully out from angry treacherous seas for the glassy sunlit blue of placid waters, so Pete looked from the man-made war that engulfed him, out onto the world of promise; the untenanted hills and valleys of the wilderness.

Yet it was only a promise, a definite and certain bargain, it seemed to Pete, whose mind from being too much alone began to picture his enemies, Browning, Sharpe and the entire crowd that went with them, as enemies alike of the goddess nature; sore spots festering in the side of peace and harmony they seemed. And the thought only whetted his appetite the more for the day of reckoning! When it came, he told himself, the reward would be his! Often he had thought of the reward, and wondered after all what it would mean to him. There was the wealth of the Dead Horse Mine; Hawkins would share that with him, he knew. Gold!—No, the thought was repulsive. At one time he had had the use of all of the stuff

he wanted, and the very use of it had sent him racing madly along what he now pictured as a hopeless, cheerless road—a trail of sickly yellow that seemed to end in a swamp of distorted notions, blasted hopes, lost souls and despondency. No, it was not gold! The glory of victory then, the elation that would come through establishing the supremacy of right over wrong! Yes, surely, there would be great satisfaction in winning the fight. Yet somehow the thought that victory over the skulking enemies of the hills, alone constituted his reward failed to satisfy him. Something was lacking still, something his heart demanded, and he knew what it was—even as all men know! The companionship of a woman—the soul-satisfying blending of kindred spirits and strong vigorous bodies.

Woman! Ah! With a pang of remorse he reviewed his knowledge of them, of women who adorned the yellow trail! As he thought of them he closed his eyes and looked upon the trail as it seemed to him now, a trail jammed with humanity. On its gilded way he pictured men in the lead, men doing as they pleased to the extent of their ability; some pausing occasionally to take on a new stock of "isms," new notions and explanations in justification of their heedless journey. On this trail he seemed to see the women he had known; some in the van-

guard with the men, but mostly a group just beginning the perilous journey. He saw them hesitate, noted the invisible restraint, the silent protesting of their souls! Then, as they struggled with themselves there came counter-currents from the vanguard of men and women ahead—messengers, it seemed, bringing strange and fascinating doctrines. There was one carrying a banner called *The New Psyche*; still others parading the lure of "Free Love," "trial marriage" and other fascinating doctrines, until finally he saw first one, and then another of the women he knew break from the hesitating crowd and rush past the banner bearers and on to the mob in front!

A woman, yes, but not one of these! He shuddered as he opened his eyes and looked again toward the setting sun. Unworthy as he was, he knew now his soul had never surrendered; and he breathed silent thanks for the strange, unaccountable something that had sent him rushing madly away from himself, on the journey that ended in the mountains, and he prayed that when his reward came, if ever he earned one, it would be a woman with a soul that could bare itself to the purity of the mountains about him, and that he would be worthy to accept such a reward!

As the fire died out, he sought a sheltered spot near tumbled boulders, burrowed a hole

into the snow, wrapped himself warmly in blanket and canvas, and went to sleep with the sun.

For the first time since his flight to the hills he remained quietly hidden in his hole in the snow for fully a half hour after the sun was up. Instead of plunging boldly out, as was his custom, he now carefully furrowed a long telescope-like hole through snow he had banked against the hole to cover his retreat. For fully a half hour he lay there silently watching the back trail. His strategy served him well for there, scarcely one hundred yards down the mountain side, came two lithe figures with light packs slung high on their backs and rifles, glittering in the sunshine, in their hands. Pete, however, greeted the sight with little or no emotion for he had been certain for hours past that someone would come and had long since prepared himself for the expected encounter.

Nevertheless, he studied them carefully as they approached, and soon made out the leader to be none other than Slim Eliot, the half-breed. The man behind was a stranger, but Pete could tell from his manner that he was a man used to winter travel, and from the great similarity of features of the two he deducted that the unknown was also a half-breed and perhaps even related to Eliot.

Pete, thanks to the care with which he had

made his trail the day before, had ample opportunity to observe his would-be captors, as they circled about the high point, keeping their eyes glued on the trail that led to the miniature plateau where Pete had made his camp.

Gradually they made their way until only one lap separated them from the tell-tale remains of the camp-fire. In spite of his well-laid plan of action Pete felt more than ordinary concern over the cramped stiffness of his body caused by his long sleep in the snow bank. With desperate energy he kicked his feet and thrashed his limbs about in their narrow quarters. His fingers were stiff and cold, but he had plenty of time to adjust them to the trigger guards of his guns, one of which he held in each hand.

Shivering from the tenseness of the moment he pulled up his knees beneath him and made ready to spring. He could plainly hear the loud thumping of his heart as he watched eagerly for the first appearance of the fur capped heads above the last ridge. Suddenly they appeared, and so close to him that he could actually see the snapping black of their eyes. With a tremendous burst of energy he flung the snow from before him and fairly catapulted himself to the snow before the half-breeds. With a startled cry of astonishment, Eliot and

his mate shrunk back confused and shocked into abject helplessness.

"Rifles down, hands up, quick!" Pete thundered, as he towered above them.

Apparently expecting instant death, both men eagerly complied with the command, and began to plead for mercy.

"Pardon, M'sieu Alden, pardon!" they cried in broken French and English.

"We ees queet so—pardon!"

"Keep your arms high and turn your backs, I might need your other guns," Pete ordered, advancing on the men as he did so. Then, extracting revolvers and two murderous knives from their belts, he shouted suddenly:

"Now get up on the hill and we'll see about this *pardon* stuff. Quick, jump!" He emphasized his latest command by pumping two shots into the snow beneath the feet of his victims. The effect was instantaneous; with incredible quickness the two breeds sprang over the three or four feet of the raise, and gained the miniature hill above. Pete, thoroughly satisfied with the apparent abject submission of the men, hesitated a moment before following, to throw the captured guns and knives into the soft snow at his feet. The rifles had already disappeared in it, and for a second only Pete bent over to add the captured guns and knives to the pile. But that second was enough. Quick as a flash, like

two frenzied catamounts, Eliot and his companion sprang upon him! The sudden impact of their bodies sent Pete face first floundering in the snow, where, with a prodigious effort, he wallowed about, swinging his arms flail-like until at length he grasped a boot strap in one hand, and an arm in the other. Whether they belonged to the same man or not he could not tell. Bringing to bear all of the pent-up strength of muscles made hard as steel through weary weeks of strenuous labor at the mine, he made one mighty flop, keeping his vice-like grip on the boot strap and arm as he did so, and hurled himself over the edge of the ridge. Then followed a strange conglomeration of arms, legs and bodies as the three rolled and slid down the mountain side. Early in the wild plunge, Pete knew he was securely entangled with both of his assailants, and with deadly effect he used every opportunity to shift his grip from one place to another, punching viciously into the rolling bodies as he did so. For fully half a minute the three continued their desperate struggle down the mountain side, piling up finally on rocks a full hundred yards below with a force that only snow prevented from inflicting certain death. Down, down into the drifted snow they sank, resting finally in a smothering heap of flour-like whiteness. Somewhere along the descent, Pete had lost one of his men; at

least he had hold of but one when he finally came to the dizzy realization that he had no broken bones—and was still in Montana, with an hired assassin, resting apparently stunned, in his arms.

Badly shaken as he was, he commenced at once a frantic scramble for the air without. With his first movement came a stinging blow on the chin from the man in his arms. With a grunt of rage, Pete retaliated, not with one arm, but with both fists working at short range like trip hammers on the body and face of the 'breed. For fully half a minute the two men fought, first one and then the other landing short-arm, muffled blows. Gradually they worked themselves near the edge of the drift, and as the surface came near, the fight increased in intensity. Even in the midst of the battle Pete gloried in the response of his muscles and lungs, as he called upon them for more and more. He was first to emerge, and still grasping his adversary by the neck, he jerked the face to the light of day and smashed into it with a powerful blow of his right fist. The man sank limply into the snow and Pete knew that Slim Eliot would be floating on fluffy clouds for a goodly while.

With the lust of battle still gripping him tensely he took a long breath and looked about for Eliot's companion. He expected to find

him emerging from the snowdrift, but was wholly unprepared for the shock he received when, turning in his tracks, he found himself looking into the muzzle of a rifle.

"Now it ees for you—my frien'—Pierre weel now keel you—so!"

Pete, as though stupefied with horror at the sudden turn of events, looked helplessly into the muzzle of the rifle. By some miracle, the breed had become disentangled early in the descent down the hill, and had had sufficient time to recover his weapon.

As he listened to the words, Pete realized he would be dead already, save for the inherent craving of the Indian blood for torture. Pete looked sullenly at the rifle, as though to dare it to finish its work. As he looked his eyes opened wide. Pierre saw the expression.

"You mean we will *both* die—the muzzle of your rifle is packed with snow—it will explode!" Pete shouted.

The truth of the words were all too obvious to the half-breed who knew full well the danger of firing a shell into a plugged-up barrel. Yet he tried desperately to maintain his supremacy.

"Pierre is better wis ze knife; he weel keel you, my frien'!" he snarled, as he dropped the rifle to the ground and whipped out one

of the long dagger-like knives Pete had earlier removed from his belt.

With the slight turn of fortune in his favor, Pete sprang into action. Scraping a great double handful of snow he threw it full at the face of the advancing breed, plunging off sideways as he did so directly at the body of the prostrate Eliot. With sheer strength of back and arms, he jerked the limp form to its feet and held it there as a buffer between himself and Pierre. A second more, and the latter would have released the long knife, which he held poised in the air for a deadly throw.

For fully ten minutes Pierre danced like a mad man in a semi-circle, as near the soft drift as he could get, sparring for a vantage spot from which to release his knife. Gradually Pete worked his way closer and closer, straining every muscle, as he jerked his human shield about to meet the menacing knife.

Seeing the uselessness of the effort, Pierre at length put the knife between his teeth, and bent over the rifle, as though to remove from the barrel the tightly frozen wad of snow. One slit of air, however small, through that wad, and Pete knew the fight would be over, yet he knew of no way the trick could be done.

With a crafty, sinister smile Pierre quickly snatched out the tail of his heavy woolen shirt and cut a piece nearly a foot square from it.

A second more and it was lighted, the hot flame going directly into the snow packed barrel of the rifle.

With a frenzied shout of desperation, Pete summoned all of his strength, clutched firmly at the body of Eliot who already was slowly regaining consciousness in his arms, whipped him high above his head, and before Pierre could move, sent Eliot crashing into him! So terrific was the impact of the blow that both of the breeds disappeared as though by magic beneath the crust of snow that covered the drift, Pete staggering in after them. But he had no opportunity there to come to grips with the wily Pierre, who, thinking the rifle must surely be in the hands of his enemy, frantically burrowed his way to the far side of the drift, and with a frightened yell sprang out and over the mass of boulders, running, sliding and rolling in turns, down the slope of the mountain. Keeping his eye on Eliot, Pete finally shook the snow of his second plunge from him, picked up the now useful rifle and sent half a dozen shots in the general direction of the fast-retreating Pierre, hoping to increase the panic with which the 'breed was apparently leaving the mountains.

Completely exhausted as he was from the strenuous exercise of the morning, he leisurely tied the wrists and ankles of Eliot, and sat basking in the sun until sufficient strength re-

turned to enable him to negotiate the steep hill down which they had rolled.

At length, however, he succeeded in moving all of the equipment from the camp above, down to where his prisoner lay, now fully conscious, but sullenly quiet.

By adding the food taken from the two packs of the breeds, Pete was finally able to prepare a breakfast that did ample justice to the state of his appetite, and apparently to that also of his prisoner.

Breakfast finished the packs were again rolled, and with a veritable arsenal about his belt, Pete began on Eliot. Starting with the assumption that Hawkins must still be alive, and that Eliot knew where he was, he conducted a third degree examination that lasted for hours.

At first Eliot stoutly refused to talk and neither threats or promises could induce him to tell what he knew. But at length Pete discovered the tack that proved successful. By the merest chance he referred to Pierre as Eliot's brother, and to the old Indian woman in the gulch as his mother. Following this line, Pete repeated a mythical story in which the old squaw told him that her son Eliot had not searched for the fifty thousand dollars at all, but had intended double-crossing Buller and Alguin. Following this, and perhaps be-

cause he hoped for clemency at the hands of Pete, Eliot confessed the entire intrigue concerning the supposed cache of money, told a broken story of how he had started for Jumbo Point, but had been persuaded by his mother to give up the trip until Spring, when it would be safer. Then he told how he had reported the story Pete had told to be a lie, and how, finally, he found it actually to be a lie when Pierre, his brother, came back and said that Hawkins had cached nothing in the Jumbo Point region, as Pierre himself was trapping there, and would certainly have found Hawkins' trail. Eliot then told how he believed Hawkins had hid the money somewhere; and how, when Buller went to kill him, taking Eliot with his sled along to haul the body, he himself had induced Bull to let him commit the deed. Buller, he said, had at first objected, but when Tamarack Sue said she could not love a man who killed, Eliot was given the job, Buller hastening back to the prison house to meet the Sheriff, whom he expected would be coming for Pete.

Eliot proposed a scheme to Tamarack Sue for saving Hawkins' life, he went on, as soon as Buller left. She had agreed to the scheme, and together they took the wounded man to a lonely cabin far out in the mountains.

Since then Hawkins had twice given him false information about the supposed fifty thousand dollars, he complained; and he was just returning from his second trip, when he met Houston, Browning's lawyer.

Slim Eliot wanted to stop at this point in the story, but Pete urged and led him on, explaining that he already knew enough to make trouble—but that if he knew it all he might let Slim go.

With great reluctance, Eliot repeated how Houston directed him to bring back the dead body of Brud Hawkins; and of what he would do if Eliot failed to obey.

It seemed from Eliot's rather sketchy story, that long before the advent of the Salmon River Gold Co., someone, probably Eliot's mother, had committed a desperate crime on the Indian reservation, following which she had changed her name and disappeared, other Indians on the reservation assisting by swearing she was dead. In looking up titles to placer claims, Houston, Eliot explained, had in some strange manner traced his mother from her claim in the gulch back to the old crime. It was the fear of having her brought to trial for this crime, that made Eliot willing to obey Houston.

"And did you bring back Hawkins' body?" Pete asked, his voice choking with emotion.

"No," Eliot answered reluctantly, "Mees-ter Houston, he ees want you queek—then come M'sieu Hawkins."

* * * *

CHAPTER XV

SPURRED on by the sudden favorable turn of the wheel of fortune which now held out the promise of an early meeting with Hawkins and Tam, Pete bent every effort toward getting well under way before the comparatively easy travel under clear skies gave way to perilous journeying through storm-ridden mountains.

Following the recital of his sordid story, Eliot seemed submissive and willing enough to become a party to a temporary truce with his late enemy, but Pete took no unnecessary chances. Always during the day Eliot led the way, Pete carrying the packs of both of them in consideration of the greater hardships of breaking the trail which fell upon the half-breed. Each night Pete selected the camp site with great care, always locating in the vicinity of rocky, broken country, where a cave beneath or between boulders could be used for sleeping quarters. Every night Eliot went in first, Pete assuming the role of a sleeping guard at the entrance. He had thrown away all but his own two guns and at night he took pains to keep these on the side nearest the entrance.

For three days they tramped silently and

hard, the breed setting a killing pace that would have worn out any but an experienced and hardened mountaineer; but Pete's life at the mine, and his weary tramps through the mountains preceding the meeting of Eliot and his brother, stood him in good stead now as he swung along behind the leader, face set hard, and eyes grimly fastened on the distant peak that marked the trail's end. Eliot had said the journey would carry them thirty miles at least, but when he had pointed out the peak, Pete felt that the distance had been over-estimated by at least one-half. Now at the end of the third day he was beginning to feel that if the breed had been at fault in his guess, it was because he had grossly underestimated the distance.

Scarcely a word passed between the men as they made their third camp. Eliot seemed to devote his entire attention to long and anxious looks at little flecks of clouds that gathered like puffs of fluffy cotton about the setting sun. Pete saw his worried look and asked its meaning.

"The sun-dogs—they are come," he answered solemnly.

"Sun-dogs?" Pete looked at the queer dots of clouds about the sun—"What is the meaning of that?"

"When sun-dog—she come—they ees al-

ways much bad storm in mountain. It ees better we stay heer, tree—mebbe five day.”

Pete made no comment, but as he ate his frugal supper of corn, dried fish and snow water biscuits, he joined Eliot in many anxious glances at the evening sky.

Darkness again found them nestling between huge boulders, Pete, as always on the outside, sleeping with his right hand firmly gripped about the butt of his long barreled gun.

As they emerged for breakfast on the following morning, Pete hastened to survey the sky for signs of the predicted storm. He noted with much relief that the sun was already creeping slowly over the distant crags, and that, save for a slight wind that came floating over the frozen surface of the snow, there was no material change in the weather from the past four days.

Breakfast finished, Eliot filled his pipe and remained sitting on the canvas of his pack.

“Come on, it is already late,” Pete grunted, as he prepared his own pack for the day’s march.

“Eliot—he ees stay heer—sun-dog—she warn heem,” the breed replied slowly, but with evident finality.

“Sun-dogs, or no sun-dogs, we’re starting,” Pete growled in reply, and as he uttered the

words, he gave his belt a vicious hitch, throwing the holster of his guns into a more prominent and accessible position.

Eliot slowly drew up his shoulders into a long, exasperated shrug, such as only a half-breed could make; a shrug that said more plainly than words: "Go ahead if you are fool enough; but I'm staying here."

Pete was in no humor for an argument. The excessive hard pace of the past few days, coupled with his intense anxiety to know if Eliot had told the truth concerning the fate of Hawkins, caused him to shout short and ugly words at the shrugging breed.

"You come *now*, Eliot, or by God you stay here forever." With the words Pete ripped a gun from its holster, and pointing it straight at Eliot's head, continued:

"Come—you move—get started—we travel or I travel alone, and you *quit* traveling for good."

With a sullen and murderous look Eliot slowly got to his feet and rolled his pack. A few minutes later the two were once more on the move.

By noon, the sun was nearly hidden behind a dark grey veil that seemed to form like another sky as far as the eye could see. The gentle breeze, as though encouraged by the retreat of the sun, now came in strong and yet

stronger gusts over the bare spots in the unbroken snow about them, stopping here and there to send little twists of swirling white before it. Pete had seen storms in the mountains before, but never had he been abroad in one of them. On the night he left the Dead Horse Mine there had been a storm; but only an orderly snow fall, compared with the storm that seemed to be gathering about him now.

More than once he felt pangs of regret at his harsh treatment of Eliot, as the conviction grew that, after all, the 'breed must have known best. As they forged silently ahead, Pete observed the marked absence of broken rock and boulders. They were passing through the last bit of broken country, it seemed. Out through scrub cedars ahead Pete could see a wide white expanse of snow that stretched away in a smooth and unbroken sheet like the waters of a placid lake. He glanced back and up at where the sun should be; and gave a sigh of relief at what seemed like a break in the clouds. Perhaps the storm would end in snow fall alone, and then pass on. He hesitated a moment, and was impressed with the mildness of the temperature. Even the wind had died down. As they passed through the last of the cedars Eliot stopped short and pointed straight ahead of him. There, from behind a clump of trees, came a procession of lean gaunt wol-

ves, looking neither to the right nor left, and apparently unconcerned at the presence of the men, for they passed within twelve feet of where Pete and Eliot stood; six of them, all hungry-looking beasts as they trailed past with ears flattened against their heads and tongues hanging red and hot from half-open mouths that exposed gleaming white teeth.

Pete stood stock-still as though bewildered by the strange procession; then Eliot turned to him.

"Eet ees the warning again. When the wolf she walk like that—bad storm come to mountain; eet ees better we queet."

Pete glanced hurriedly about the scattered cedars. Nothing even approaching a camp site fit for securing a prisoner throughout a storm, could be seen. He looked out across the white expanse ahead and beyond to the jagged outlines of the rugged mountain that bordered the far side of the open expanse. He looked long and carefully before he answered Eliot. That mountain side, not five hours' away it seemed, could answer the question that had never left him for months. It would at least tell him if he might again see Brud Hawkins and Tam alive.

"No," he fairly shouted, "we go on—and on—it is only your superstitions!" Then he added as though to apologize for his harshness,

"See, the wind is down and the air seems warm. Keep going, Eliot, straight for that mountain!" As he finished his words, he pointed with his gun to the distant outlines ahead.

No mercenary ever faced the enemy with greater reluctance than Eliot, who, leaving the scant protection of the cedars, plunged at Pete's fanatical command out into the snow field ahead.

The icy crust upon which they walked scarcely held their weight, as time after time they floundered helplessly up to their hips in snow before they could gain the frozen surface. Here, too, in the wide open, Pete soon learned that the wind, far from having died down, had only changed its course. Before, it had come in irregular gusts, only occasionally becoming strong enough to stir up the snow; while now it came with steady full force, uninterrupted by trees or boulders.

Within half an hour after leaving the shelter, the mercury seemed to drop like magic, and a new kind of cold, one that permeated his very lungs and fairly dried them up, came down with the wind.

Pete followed the example of Eliot in front and pulled his fur cap well down over his face. He was used to the rigors of winter, but not to this. With the wind came snow. Not from the clouds above, it was too cold for that, only

fine drifting snow, gathered in little hard crystals from the broad expanse about him, whirled with the wind. Little by little the air filled with it, and Pete found it necessary to keep closer and closer to the back of the 'breed, lest he lose him in the dense flurry. Eliot did his work well and with head bent over, face almost to the snow at his feet, he kept doggedly at it. Pete knew by the continued stinging of wind on his right cheek that their direction was true, although it was impossible, even between blasts of wind, to see more than a dozen feet ahead.

Gritting his teeth with determination, Pete followed doggedly behind the 'breed, straining under the double task of keeping directly behind him and balancing himself from being swept over from the force of the wind against his double burden of packs. For hours, it seemed, they fought thus until at length a sickening feeling in his heart and lungs warned Pete of the terrible strain he was under. Phlegm, hot and stringy, came from his throat and seemed to choke him as desperately he tried to keep up with Eliot. But the mad struggle weakened the 'breed quickly and even as Pete struggled to keep up, he saw Eliot, like a fantastic white curve, waver in his tracks and fall to the snow. A moment there, and he once more struggled to his feet, and staggered on.

Their faces no longer registered the direc-

tion of the wind, and only the law of nature that causes man in his extremity to follow the course of least resistance, guided them now. Even in his thumping brain, Pete knew that this meant wandering far from their true course, for wind at their backs would send them straight along the frozen plain, and not across it. Yet resistance was useless; even his iron determination could not force his body against such terrible odds.

Eliot was fast weakening, and time after time he literally swooned against the body of Pete, who came directly back of him. Slowly Pete realized that further progress with the two packs on his back would be impossible. The thought of releasing them seemed strangely pleasant and he loosed them to the mercy of the ravaging wind and snow. The relief thus afforded strengthened him to a renewed effort, and for fully an hour he kept on, huddled close to Eliot. At the end of an hour, however, his heart, already swollen with much violent pounding, until it seemed to be the only burden his weary legs supported, sank in hopelessness as Eliot stumbled heavily forward, and lay quietly in the snow. Pete leaned over him, and as he did so, his feet bumped into the obstruction that had tripped the breed. With a faint curiosity, more an excuse for letting up for a moment, perhaps, he

bent over, as though to see what it was that lay there, hidden in the blinding wind and snow. As he did so he caught a glimpse of brown canvas, just a corner, freed of snow for an instant. That instant was enough, for Pete recognized the packs he had released more than an hour before! Then, with the sickening realization that they had indeed been traveling in a circle, he, too, for a moment lost courage and sank down beside the prostrate form of Eliot. But only for a moment. The physical man was nearly spent and now the inner being—the intangible something, that brings dreams of danger even to sleeping children—spoke to him.

“Don’t quit! Don’t quit! You will die if you stop! Keep trying! Get up!” it shouted.

Pete felt his body moving again. Automatically he struggled to raise Eliot. Violently as possible, he slapped him in the face, and kicked at his body. A minute longer, and he would have been too late. But Eliot, too, it seemed, was to struggle awhile longer before giving up to the impelling lure of sleep. Slowly he staggered to his knees, then to his feet, and the two started again on their wavering course along the path of the blizzard, each, it seemed, leaning on the other. It was well that such was the case, for when Pete would sag and bend toward the snow, Eliot would support him,

and when Eliot would seem to surrender once again, Pete would be the supporting one.

Thus they continued their desperate fight until Pete at length was no longer conscious of his effort. He seemed to be obeying only the voice within. It kept urging him on and on, its loud shouting seeming to rise even above yet another voice that counseled rest; sweet peaceful slumber, where all was warm and beautiful. The first voice seemed harsh and commanding and hurt him with its shoutings; the second one, mild and soft yet tender beyond words! Thus the dual fight within raged on, while the men continued their dogged, grim fight. Eliot answered the lure of the tempter first and fell heavily to the snow, going limp as he sank like a man shot through the heart. He had swooned many times before, but this time, Pete knew even in his delirious brain that the end was near for the 'breed.

Perhaps the thought that he was responsible, something at least, inspired a last frantic effort that spurred Pete on to grasp the arm of the fallen man, and make a final effort to drag him along.

As he did so the loud voice within seemed to leave him, and to take a position just ahead; yes, even the other voice had gone out, and both seemed to call him on through the murdering cold of the icy blasts. In answer to

them he tugged with all his feeble strength; the body moved, and he tugged again. The body came ever closer, as foot by foot he worked, struggling only to bring his burden to the dancing voices that promised sleep and rest. He was coming closer and closer! And as he tugged, it seemed his breath stayed with him longer, even the blinding snow grew fainter, and he feared in a dazed way that he was asleep already! But, no! The voices were still ahead, and he tugged once more. A few more frantic pulls and something at his back held him fast. The wind seemed suddenly far away! With great effort he turned his head, and as he did so his face brushed against sharp branches. Then he let his burden drop and raised his hands. A tree! He was among trees! He could sleep! Ah—sweet, sweet sleep! Then, the sudden absence of sense deadening wind cleared his brain for a fleeting moment. He was cold—horribly cold, and he must have a fire! Mechanically he stretched out his arms, and felt his numbed hands come in contact with branches that resisted stubbornly. Leaning heavily upon them he felt them give, and heard the riflecrack that he had come to know so well—the sound of cold dry branches breaking and splintering beneath his weight. Like a man in a dream he gathered up the splinters and broken branches from the frozen snow and added others to the

pile. A moment more and he was fumbling feebly at the match box that hung from his belt. But time and again, as he tried to open it, he failed. At last with a desperate effort he placed it between his teeth. The frozen steel box seemed to burn his lips and tongue, before at last it opened. All but one of the precious matches he dropped, as he shook the full box into his gloved hand. Grasping the remaining stick as best he could in both hands, he struck it against the side of a split branch, and watched as though in a dream the tiny red flame lick into the resinous splinters of the piled wood before him.

As the flames leaped higher and higher they spread into the unbroken branches of the clump of scrub trees about, and soon a raging fire sent its flames high into the branches overhead and ate hungrily into the snow beneath. For a time it seemed that Pete would still lose the reward of his mighty efforts, for as the fire roared there before him, he swayed back and forth, now toward it, now out from it, as though to give up the fight, and seek the peaceful slumber that had lured him on. But as the warmth increased to severe heat, his deadened senses seemed to melt, and he faintly realized that the man lying beside him was slowly but surely sleeping the sleep of death. Roused to action by the thought, he dragged the 'breed

near the fire, hoping the pain of thawing flesh would waken him.

The effort to revive the half frozen Eliot increased his own circulation, and soon he was able to gather armfuls of brittle branches from trees about him, and add them to the roaring fire, which now had melted a huge hole, nearly to the frozen ground beneath the snow. Into this sheltered pocket Pete drew the 'breed, rubbing his face and hands with snow, and rolling him as roughly as his weakened state would permit, about the floor of the shelter. Outside, and only a dozen feet or more from him, the blizzard still raged in all its fury; but he had no mind or thought for the course or direction of the storm, nor for the providence of nature that had so miraculously brought him to this haven of shelter among stunted trees that clustered about a pile of jutting rocks and boulders.

At length Eliot opened his eyes and groaned in pain as the heat increased in the narrow hole, and sent warm blood against frozen flesh. Pete, overcome by the superhuman efforts of his fight against the wild blizzard, staggered heavily over the slowly reviving Eliot, and slept.

How long into the night he had slept, he knew not, when suddenly the sting of flame against the flesh of his hand aroused him. The fire had crept into the pile of branches he had

failed to throw onto the burning heap, and a moment more would have seen not only his gloved hand, but the fur of his coat as well, a mass of flames.

Eliot was still sleeping when Pete awoke, his troubled breathing indicating that he suffered intensely even as he slept; and Pete did not disturb him.

The storm without had apparently died down, and as Pete looked about he tried to get an impression that would help him locate his refuge in the country he remembered. His eyes were swollen, and icicles still hung like crystals from his brows. At first he could see nothing in the semi-darkness as he struggled painfully to his feet, brushed the obstructions from before his eyes, and stared fixedly out into the milky white night.

Something far out before him caused him to start and again brush his eyes. A light, it seemed, was shining somewhere out in the great expanse before him. He watched it breathlessly, as he gradually recalled the significance of a light. Ah, it moved! He counted the swings—two—four—six—they had no meaning—there were too many of them. Then a sudden thought struck him and set him to gathering a handful of the broken branches from beneath his feet. He bundled them into a torch, stuck them for a moment into the blazing

fire and crawled laboriously out of the pit. Raising his flaming torch on high he waved it back and forth in a great arc, and watched breathlessly for the answer. The light, wherever it was, stopped in the middle of a swing, as Pete commenced his own waving, and for a moment the mysterious light disappeared entirely. Then Pete lowered his torch in front of him, and tried desperately to recall the signal code he had received from Tam. At last it came to him and with slow, wide swings he sent the message: "Come to the light."

Instantly the other light came into sight again, moved rapidly straight up and down, and faded from view. Forgetting for a moment the intense pain of his frost-bitten limbs, Pete hobbled back into the pit, threw arms full of wood on the fire, and waited.

* * * *

CHAPTER XVI

AS the heavy grey blanket of early morning thinned and melted into the cold glimmering white of day, Pete gathered more wood from the thickets about him, and once more ministered to the agonized Eliot. The fitful slumber into which the 'breed had fallen lasted only until the more urgent demands of nature had been satisfied, then it gave way to pangs of excruciating pain as Pete rubbed snow with all the vigor his own exhausted muscles would permit. At first the entire right arm and leg of the 'breed seemed done for; but as Pete observed the pain increase in intensity as he rubbed, he began to hope that the limbs might yet be saved.

So ardently did he set to his work, that nearly an hour elapsed before he renewed the vigil he had been keeping on the white expanse of snow that stretched away in the direction from which he had seen the light in the early morning darkness.

Now, with the sudden realization that his quest for Hawkins and Tam might soon be ended, he made once more for the surface of the snow, and peered anxiously about. His eyes were still swollen and dim; but as he took

in the country about him, he at length discovered that he and Eliot had indeed traveled through the blizzard in a great circle, finally returning to the very edge of the rough mountain side from which Eliot had been so reluctant to move. They were perhaps two miles below the spot where the wolves had passed them, Pete guessed, as he strained his burning tear-smearred eyes for some indication of the coming of the messengers he knew must be on the way.

Faintly, as though looking through a mist, he distinguished objects moving in the far distance. Closer and closer they came, but yet he could not describe them. For fully half an hour he stood there with his gloved hand shading his eyes against the snow-glare which was already assuming painful proportions as the sun mounted higher and higher in the wintry sky. Time after time he brushed the mist of icy tears from his streaming eyes until they were sore and raw from the rubbing. At last he made out the distant forms of two men that loomed suddenly large and vigorous against the white background of snow. Now and again as he followed their course they would seem to be lost behind great hummocks and billows of drifted snow, while in the clear spaces they glided in long graceful swing as though on runners. As they approached he made out the out-

lines of a long and narrow sleigh that trailed behind them.

As Pete watched the approach of the men they seemed, on coming close, to slacken their pace and gaze uncertainly along the fringe of cedar and rock, as though not sure which way to go. Seeing their evident confusion, Pete started for the open, hoping to find a vantage point, from which he could signal. As he tried to walk, his limbs refused to obey and seemed to hang like lead to his body. Determinedly he dragged them after him, half crawling and half walking to the point he selected, not fifteen feet away. At length he reached the spot, and with great difficulty waved his arms and opened his mouth to shout a welcome. But his lips were swollen and clumsy and even his tongue seemed to forget how to form the words he would say. With another brace of his feet, as he made to wave his hands, the crust of snow beneath gave away and he floundered up to his arm pits in the fine frozen snow beneath.

Vainly Pete tried to clamber out of the snow, but it was no use. He could only wait now for the coming of the rescuers who seemed still to hesitate on their way. He worked his body about, and looked back at the pit in which the smouldering fire must still be burning. As he looked, he observed a thin line of pale blue

smoke rise above the level of the snow, as though new dry wood had been added to the hot coals. Seeing this, the signal he himself should have thought of sending, he gave up his efforts to regain the frozen surface of snow, and watched the approaching men who had apparently seen the smoke, and were now hurrying directly toward him.

Scarcely an hour elapsed before he heard the swish of snow-shoes and the strong voices of men talking. A moment later he was looking up into the face of Brud Hawkins. For a moment the mountaineer stood there, plainly puzzled at what he saw. Pete's long bushy hair falling in snarled masses from beneath his fur cap, together with the white mantle of frozen beard, made a mask through which no one could have recognized the clean-cut features of Peter Alden, as Hawkins remembered him.

"Who are you, man?" the latter shouted. "My God, you're frozen! Here, Bannerie, let's get him out!"

Hawkins, assisted by his companion, grasped Pete's outstretched arms and after much effort got him to the solid surface of the snow again.

Once on his feet, Peter threw his arms slowly about Hawkins, and muttered: "Alden, —I'm Alden—thank God—I—find—you—alive."

From the scene that followed it would be difficult to tell which of the two men was the rescuer and which the rescued. Long and fervently they shook hands, patted each other on the shoulders, and tried to talk. But Pete could say little, and from sheer emotion, Hawkins could do no better.

At length, the first greetings over, Hawkins and his friend, who appeared to Pete's misty eyes, to be also a half-breed—though a man much larger and with finer features than those possessed by either Eliot or his brother, Pierre—succeeded in getting both the badly frozen Eliot and himself upon the long narrow sleigh they had brought with them, and with powerful sweeping strides, made once more across the broad expanse of snow. First Hawkins and then Bannerie would pull at the raw-hide rope that held the sleigh as they sped along, but more often it was necessary only to give it an occasional tug, so easily did it glide over the frozen surface.

What would have been a half day's journey for Pete and Eliot, Hawkins and his companion now completed in less than half that time; and before Pete could realize the distance traveled he observed the presence of boulders, stunted trees, and the sharp slope of a hill that indicated the approaching end of the journey.

A little later Pete answered the voice that had counseled sweet sleep only a few hours before. But now there was no disturbing command that racked his very brain and tormented him to further effort. Instead, he slept, long and soundly, turning his weary, aching body unconsciously as though it wished to make certain that it was indeed once more resting on a soft warm mattress.

His eyes for weeks past had been accustomed, on awakening, to look out upon early morning in all its radiant glory, and always the grandeur of it had thrilled him. Now, as he opened his eyes after long hours of sleep, his gaze rested upon the masterpiece itself of the handiwork of God—full upon the face of a beautiful woman, bending tenderly over him, administering the while warm fragrant oil to the crusted skin beneath his shaggy beard.

During his sleep his lips had returned to something resembling their normal shape, and he found he could mutter words, as he exclaimed: "Tam—you, too—here! Thank God! Both of you—Hawkins and Tam!"

"Yes—Mr. Alden," Tam replied, "we are both here—and your patient is much better than his doctor—aren't you, Mr. Hawkins?"

Hawkins was there, sitting on the edge of the bed, and could speak for himself. But before he could utter a word, Pete replied:

"No wonder—with such a nurse!" Then he stopped short as he noticed the slight frown and troubled look that came over the face of the girl, as she gathered her bottles and linen from the bed. For a moment she seemed undecided whether to carry them from the room, or to remain. She hesitated only a moment however, and then called a French name which Pete could not understand.

The object of the call soon appeared in the low doorway that separated the "lean-to" or built-on bedroom from the rest of the cabin.

"Here, Marie, please take these out, and see what you can do for Jacques Eliot. He seems to be suffering very much," Tam directed, as the woman approached.

"Now, Pete," Hawkins began, "when you are ready, tell me how you feel—what you have done—how it has all happened. My God! If you could see yourself. Tam, for heaven's sake bring old Bannie's mirror." He finished with an amused twinkle in his eye.

Pete's eyes followed the girl across the room as she went for the mirror. He thought there was a twinkle in her eyes also as she held it before him, and he looked intently as though to make certain.

"The mirror, man—look in the mirror," Hawkins broke in, his good natured old face wreathed in smiles.

Caught in the pardonable act of staring at the first girl he had seen in months, Pete grasped the mirror in confusion, and then gazed at what he saw much like a frightened child watching the antics of a suspended spider.

The image in the mirror brought him to a sitting posture with a jerk—a jerk that only accentuated the distorted vision he beheld in the glass. Hair, great masses of it, made his head and face seem three times the size he remembered it to be. Little red gimlets where his eyes should be looked out of shaggy holes in the woolly mass; wherever he could see skin, it seemed red and crusted, or black from its recent frost bite. For a moment he was held speechless by the spectacle. Then pushing the glass violently from him, he said to Hawkins:

“For a long while I’ve been thinking the most important thing in the world was to save you, the Dead Horse Mine, and”—he seemed about to include Tam, when an expression on her baffling face stopped him—“and so-on,” he continued, “but now, I know the most important thing in the world is to get to a barber shop and a bath tub. Great Moses! There isn’t a barber shop in the world that would let me through the door! Do you suppose that fellow at the store in Moapa has saved my togs?”

Tam smiled faintly, perhaps a little wist-

fully, while Hawkins in spite of his worried face, laughed at Pete's consternation.

"Well," Hawkins finally found breath enough to remark, "you're a mighty lucky young man that you aren't in the fix of your traveling mate, Eliot, in there. How in the world that 'breed up and gets caught in a blizzard, and you don't, beats me."

"And I don't?" Pete stormed, "and I don't?—I'm half frozen—right now. We were together all the time."

"Ah, yes, so you were. But you kept moving. Two days here and your frost bites will be gone. The 'breed in there will be on his back for a month. But come, tell me—I'm dying to know how."

"Dinner first, Mr. Hawkins," Tam admonished, "let the poor man eat. He must be starved; aren't you, Mr. Alden?"

"Quite," agreed Pete. "And anyhow, it's you folks' story first, then mine."

Susie summoned the woman again, and this time took from her a steaming bowl of broth, a huge tin plate of what looked to Pete like the finest roast meat he had ever seen, and several other steaming dishes that filled the room with the stimulating odor of a savory meal.

As Pete ate, Hawkins entered into his story.

"Well," he began, "guess you know how things stood when they packed me into that

low wagon box on runners. For the life of me I couldn't and can't yet see why they wanted to do away with me. Thought at first they wanted the Dead Horse—knew they did in fact, from the way their lawyer and Demons had been hounding me. But that didn't explain why that gangster fellow, Buller Garret, got so poison mad at me. Later on I found out he was in love with Susie, here." At this Susie blushed violently and made as if to carry out some of Pete's discarded dishes. Hawkins, however, seemingly unaware of the embarrassment caused the girl, continued: "And he got it into his head that I was digging up his past in order to get something or other on the Gold Company. Well, he was mighty worried lest I might tell Tam here, and then he seemed to be working under orders from Houston, too. But it was Susie here that saved me, after all—that is Susie and your whopping big yarn about the fifty thousand. Whew!"

Hawkins paused in his story to take a long breath, then, placing his hand to his forehead, he continued: "What a blessing and a curse money is, Pete. It saved my life this time, though, for your frozen friend in there," pointing a thumb over his shoulder to where Slim Eliot was lying, "made a bargain with Tam—bless her heart—to spare me if I would tell where it was—the fifty thousand, that's about

all, isn't it, Susie? Anyhow, that's how we happened to be hidden away up here. Yes," he continued brokenly, "that's all—"

"Of course, it is not, Mr. Hawkins; go on and tell the rest. You know it isn't all"—Tam hesitated for a moment, then continued, as though weighing every word, "Mr. Alden has a right to know."

"Well," Hawkins hesitated—"you see I know, that is, we knew that you weren't dead; but might be anytime. Then I knew that it was only a matter of time until I would be found out. So," at this point the old man, visibly affected, turned his head to one side as though to hide his emotion as he forced the final words out, "I—I—made a bargain for you—and—and for all of us. I—I—signed a quit-claim deed to the Dead Horse Mine. It wasn't much, after all—I—"

"You what?" Pete shouted, as the full significance of the words came to him. "You what? You signed a deed?" His hands sought the shoulders of the miner as he lowered his voice almost to a sob, "Tell me you didn't."

Susie and Hawkins gaped in wide-eyed astonishment at the frenzy that overcame Pete as he fairly sobbed out the last words—and continued muttering: "What have you done? My God, what have you done?"

"But why—what is the matter—what *have* I done?" Hawkins finally gulped out, aware that he must have done something far worse than he himself imagined.

Before he answered, Pete looked intently from Hawkins to Susie, and choked back the rush of words that came welling up from his sorely troubled heart. Should he tell them, he asked himself? After all, wouldn't it be better to let them find out their grave mistake, and let them take the blow when circumstances lessened its sting? He sank back dejectedly on his pillow, and said no more. All his efforts in vain! All of his fight, fought for nothing! He sighed deeply as though resigned to his fate, and suppressed with difficulty the bitter tears that flooded his eyes and bade Hawkins continue.

The old miner, suspecting that Pete was withholding knowledge that held for him something worse than the pangs of regret he had already experienced, continued in a broken voice:

"She," pointing to Susie, "found out—that you were in their hands, that you were at the mine. They told her that you would be killed, buried in the tunnel unless I sold the property to them, and that I would never come out of the winter alive. And so—I did it—didn't we, Susie?" Poor Hawkins struggled

hard to shoulder all of the blame on himself, but in spite of his efforts, his actions told more eloquently than words, that he had but yielded to the pleadings of the girl—of Tamarack Sue who sat while Hawkins talked, with her head bowed, hot tears streaming down her tender cheeks.

Pete looked from one to the other, not knowing what to do, or say. His voice choked as his eyes met hers.

“Tam—Susie—why did you do it?” he finally asked.

Susie hesitated and looked for guidance to Hawkins. The mountaineer slowly shook his head in silent approval of the question she seemed to ask. Slowly she left her seat, and walked to the room beyond. As the door closed silently behind her, Hawkins leaned close to Pete’s head and whispered:

“Don’t be too hard on her, boy—she had a father once, just as you have now. She buried him under the tamaracks, and—” he quickly straightened up, as Susie returned silently through the door, carrying a letter in her hands. She walked steadily to the bedside and looked unflinching into Pete’s eyes and said:

“Yes—I alone caused Mr. Hawkins to sign the deed. You asked me why, well, here is the *only* reason.” So saying she handed Pete the letter.

Long before he had finished reading the first page, his eyes dimmed, and he could read no more. "Read it to me—please," he pleaded, as he handed it to the girl. "Read it."

It was a message from Judge Stivers. A masterful story of most of Pete's dramatic life; it described how he had been the sole joy and comfort of a father bereaved by the death of the boy's mother, death caused by his very birth in fact, and how the boy had been spoiled by riches and ill-directed love, until he had lost direction, it seemed, and knew not how to live. The letter was sad, and even Peter, who knew the story so well, was deeply touched by it. Page after page, written as only a master lawyer pleading for a life could write, followed.

Then a paragraph, stating that the letter was a "shot in the dark," the result only of a half hope that the reader might find a way in which it could be used to influence those who held Pete in their mercy, closed the message.

As Tam finished reading she handed the sheets to Pete. He looked long and searchingly at the signature, and as he did so the brow beneath his hair contracted.

For a moment the three heads bowed in silence, Pete felt the old tug and torment of his conscience within. This man, Hawkins, almost a stranger to him, had given up his all—his mine—but more, much more than that—his

fight against the Salmon River Gold Company, just to save him! And this girl, who read the letter with tears in her eyes, had pleaded for him!

The thought came crashing home to him that after all, he alone had done nothing worthy—neither of the old love of his father, nor of the sacrifice of these noble people beside him. The thought of his gigantic failure fairly sickened him, and he groaned aloud in agony.

“And so,” Hawkins concluded, “yesterday I signed the deed, and in four days I was to join you in Moapa.”

A sudden hope started Pete from his utter dejection. “Signed yesterday?” he asked wonderingly.

“Yes,” answered Hawkins, “Tam here, has been carrying on secret negotiations with Buller. He told her you were still at the Mine, and just before the blizzard, he sent a messenger to the peak yonder,” Pete, too interested in the words, paid no attention to the directions, but waited breathlessly for Hawkins to continue, “and she gave him the signed papers. He is to take them to the mine—where the first shipment of ore goes out to-morrow.” As these words passed the lips of the old man, it seemed he would break into tears. At length he continued: “All the officials are to be there, he says—Browning and all. He says they are

there for a bluff, they have no pay ore, they claim to be just working the place for me, but I am not so sure."

Pete's hands twitched nervously as he listened impatiently to the words.

"But now," Hawkins continued, bracing himself, "for heaven's sake, what brings you here? Buller's messenger said only yesterday you were still at the mine." As Hawkins finished the question he looked intently at Pete, who seemed not to hear the words at all.

"For God's sake, quick," he shouted as though waking from a dream, "where are we now?—Where are we?—Where is the mine?" He trembled with excitement, as he ignored Hawkins' further questioning, and grasped him violently by the arm as though to shake the answer from him.

"Just eight miles down the mountains—there—" Hawkins pointed off down great slopes of rolling mountains. "But the trail is twenty miles long that could bring anyone here, they must come the back way. You must be lost—where have you been?"

With swollen red eyes blazing like coals Pete sprang from the bed, his frost-bitten limbs snapping into action in spite of the terrible abuse they had suffered. Hawkins made a rush to restrain him and his frantic effort, but Pete continued rushing about the room, gathering

boots, fur cap, coat, guns and whatever else he could find that might serve him on the trail.

"Now, food—a blanket or two—and be quick, for God's sake, be quick!" he shouted. "They've lied to you! They *have lied to you!* Your mine is worth millions, man—and they are stealing it! The letter is a forgery. The dirty yellow dogs! Tam—Susie, I mean—send someone—the man out there, *anyone* to Moapa and wire Judge Stivers to come. Hurry, Hawkins, a pack and food! Hurry, for heaven's sake!"

"But I've already written him to come," Tam started to say. "Three weeks ago, when I got the letters, I wrote him all about—"

"But it's twenty miles, man—you will die on the trail," Hawkins broke in, both he and Susie raising their voices at once. But Pete heard neither, as he buckled on his belt and glared out upon the trail.

"Quick, Hawkins!" he ordered savagely, "food and blankets, or I go as I am!"

Hawkins saw the desperate earnestness of the frantic Pete, and made haste to get what he could together for the trip.

Scarcely thirty minutes from the reading of the letter, Pete found himself once more ready for the trail. In his rush he paused on the door sill long enough only to shout final instructions, and a hurried good-bye.

"Stay here until you see my signal lights. Hold out with guns against all hell till I signal," he cried as he quickly hurled his light pack to his back, grasped a pair of snow shoes under his arm—things he had never used—and then, with a fling of his right hand high in the air, made off directly away from the gentle slopes that meant twenty miles of slow, easy travel, and plunged over the frozen snow for the jagged steep peril that separated him from the Dead Horse Mine—only eight miles away.

* * * *

CHAPTER XVII

THE sun was already dipping into a bed of amber fleeced clouds, when Pete began his mad rush down the mountain side. He had hardly passed over the ridge beyond the view of anxious eyes from the trapper's cabin that had served so well as a refuge for Hawkins and Tam, when he was brought to a sharp realization of the desperateness of his undertaking. Almost with his first steps his feet slipped out from under him, and only by jabbing the pointed ends of his snow shoes into the frozen crust over which he slid, was he able to check the speed of his descent. Never entirely regaining a standing position, he half ran, half slid, and finally rolled to the first narrow strip of level ground, far down the steep incline from his starting point.

The force of his landing sent him deep into the drift, and only by surrendering his snow shoes, was he finally able to emerge, and start again.

As he descended lower and lower into the valley, the darkness increased in intensity, and not even the shadows of twilight came to aid him in adjusting himself to the intense blackness below. Time after time he butted

full into projecting rocks—sometimes falling over precipitous places and plunging through air, not knowing if he would fall on splinters of rocks far below, or alight again on soft snow close beneath him.

Hazardous as was the rapid descent, he at least felt himself moving toward his goal. It was when he encountered the adverse slopes or bulges of small ridges that rose against him, that he found progress bitterly slow. Time and again he would come upon these obstructions, seem to reach the summit, then lose his grip and roll helplessly to the bottom. Or if his progress up such slopes was steady and long continued, he would be seized with a panic lest he had reversed his course in the darkness and was making back over the steep incline of the mountain which he had descended. Each time, however, he finally dipped over the miniature summit, and started once more down the precipitous side of the main mountain.

For an hour he traveled thus, coming always closer and closer to the bottom of the gulch below.

The air seemed heavier as he descended, and when at length he brought up sharp against a protruding boulder, he deliberately paused for the first time, and lay motionless, as though suddenly afraid to rush on. Something like the feeling he had experienced when

approaching chasms encountered on hikes in his native mountains of California, seized him now, and even through the inky blackness of night, he could feel the presence of a yawning space before him.

Instinct, or the guiding hand of fate, something at any rate, took from Pete that instant the spirit of reckless abandon that had impelled him to undertake the mad plunge, and caused him to arise guardedly to his feet, and secure himself behind the spear of granite against which he had fallen. Then straining his eyes to see into the darkness, he cautiously clambered to the side of his protection, and tried to follow the shadowy outline of snow. It ended abruptly, however, and he could not tell whither it went. As he stood there his hands played over the rough surface of the rock, and he tore off a small loose fragment. This he pitched out before him and listened intently. But he heard not a sound. Perhaps it had fallen in soft snow, he reasoned. He couldn't have heard it, after all! He tried another—with the same result.

Impatient at the baffling something that held him powerless to move, he again called desperately on the resourcefulness that had been his faithful ally in the past. Even as he did so, he thought of a light, if he could only throw a light out there into the mysterious blackness before him. He remembered the

candles he had crammed into his pocket days before, just preceding his entrance into the tunnel of the Dead Horse Mine. Hope, always so ready to join forces with desire, sent his hands rapidly to the pockets of his fur coat. With difficulty he unbuttoned the flaps, and ran his fingers over the collection of articles that remained. The candles were there—but hopelessly broken and moulded together into a paste-like mass against the leather of his coat lining. Undismayed, he drew the mass forth and placed it on the shelf in the rock made by the removal of the first fragments he had thrown into the darkness. Next he unbuttoned his coat, and did as he had seen the half-breed do a week before, cut the tails from his woolen shirt.

Taking fully a third of the matted candles, he made up a small bundle of wax and wool, placing nearly a dozen leaded cartridges from his belt into the center of it. A moment more and he had it tied securely by means of a portion of lace taken from his boot. Touching a match to the greasy mass he held it long in his gloved hand, until the entire ball seemed a mass of dull red flame. Even in the first flare of the light he looked with horror upon the brink of a sheer cliff before him, and realized that only miraculous fate in the shape of projecting granite had prevented his mad plunge down, he knew not where.

An instant more and Pete flung the flaming mass far out before him, and watched it descend down—down—until it looked like a meteor in the distance. Helplessly he leaned against the boulder, and watched the ball of fire pass from his view.

Suddenly there came from the regions below a dull boom, and he knew a cartridge in the burning ball had exploded, as crash after crash followed, all echoes from the lone explosion, making their noisy way out of the gulch.

During his many quiet days at the Dead Horse Mine, Pete had studied the country about with an interest inspired not by its grandeur alone, but essentially because of a premonition that it would be his battleground in times to come. As he listened to the reverberations he tried to fix his location in his mind; to recall the gulch, and determine if possible its location in relation to the mine.

He hesitated long between staying where he was, and skirting the edge of the slippery cliff for a place to descend; his better judgment advised the former, counseled him to spread his blankets and rest until daylight showed him the way. Then came the thought of those behind in the trapper's cabin, and of the scheming rascals who had snatched victory from his very hands and were already, perhaps, dividing the spoils between them. His thoughts jumped for

a moment to San Francisco. What a mess would greet Judge Stivers there! If the Judge *had* written the letter to Tam, he certainly had not signed it! The cunningness and trickery of the thing, if the letter was indeed a forgery, but emphasized the efficiency of Houston and his henchmen on the coast, he reasoned, and new anger welled within him, as the possibilities of defeat at the hands of this same gang loomed. "No," he shouted aloud, "I must keep on! Hours, even minutes are precious!" He knew he could not wait for daylight, and, the very thought of looking from his perch high on the mountain side, looking in all probability down upon his enemies traveling through the gulch below, with a deed to the mine, as well as gold from its rich veins, sickened him, and he knew it was now—this night—or never.

He cut more from his woolen shirt, winding the cloth about the remainder of the plastic candle wax, until he had a taper-like torch nearly a foot in length. Lighting this, he grasped it near the flame, to prevent its burning faster than needed, and started hacking holes in the frozen snow along the edge of the cliff. Progress was slow and tedious, as he carefully dug each hole, putting his foot testingly into it to make certain that a foundation had been reached that would bear his weight, before he trusted himself to proceed.

The waxed wool burned all too rapidly, and its fast disappearing light hastened Pete's activity beyond the point of safety. Yet he rushed on, never faltering, and always muttering to himself meaningless words as though to keep the goddess of fate between him and the cliff. Once, the absurdity of the muttering occurred to him; but he had started it with the first hole, and dared not discontinue it until the end. As he worked his way from hole to hole he felt the compelling pull of the abyss by his side, much, he recalled, as he had felt the silent tug and pull of the tide when swimming at night in the bay at home. As he swam against the tide then, so he shaped his tracks against the pull now, and felt, with increasing hope, its diminishing force as he made his way. At length it seemed to leave him altogether, and he made more boldly for the cliff. With his last two inches of burning wool and candle grease, he crawled to the very edge, and looked for the cause of the relaxing of the pull he had felt so long. His muttering increased almost to a jabber of delight at what he saw: a gradual incline, a place where the cliff jutted off at right angles to itself, it seemed, lay there before him. He could scarcely see more than a dozen feet, yet he took to the slight hope that even this twelve feet might lead him to still another

gradual slope, and started once more to descend.

It was again all black and uncertain about him, as the last of his smoky red light faded away. With its fading, it became necessary for him to waste precious minutes there on the first few feet of the descent, in order to allow his eyes once more to become accustomed to the blackness about him. Foot by foot he crawled, letting himself slip from one niche to another, trusting to instinct and chance to guide his course aright.

But his course was no longer interrupted, and even before the darkness gave signs of breaking, he found himself once more on ground he knew, and with savage triumph radiating from his very steps, he hurried along the gulch, toward the Dead Horse Mine, whose lights already seemed to be high up at the very head of the gulch.

So close were the lights, he could even hear the sound of workmen about them, shouting orders and calling to others as though they were in groups apparently at some distance from each other. Yet he knew the mine must be at least five miles away. As he examined the lights closely he observed that what seemed to be one cluster at first, now appeared separated into little groups, ranged one behind the other. Their general appearance puzzled him,

and he tried to think what they could mean. Even as he watched them, they seemed to move, to come toward him. The shouting of men, too, came down upon him with the lights. Twice he even heard sharp cracks, like the snapping of whips above the sound of voices. Seeking a vantage point by the side of the trail, which in spite of the recent storm, showed plainly its course through the blanket of snow, he waited.

He had not long to remain there, for soon emerging suddenly before him, the lights assumed definite proportions, and he made out five heavily laden sleds, hitched together one behind the other. Two horses, also in single file, pulled them. As they came nearer, Pete made out the men; two of them carrying rifles slung loosely in the hollow of their arms, trotting along in front of the horses, while beside each sled other men hurried along. Behind them all came a group—probably four in all, with side arms dangling from their belts.

The grim significance of the thing came to Pete at once. It was the expected shipment of high grade ore, ore rich in all probability beyond anything that had ever come from the gulch! The moment of triumph that should belong to Hawkins was here passed in the dead of night by vicious thieves, who, under the cover of darkness, hurried their ill-gotten wealth out

of the mountains! Pete clenched his fist, and cursed bitterly in the darkness.

The loud voice of Demons sounded above all the others as he urged men and horses on, and Pete found it necessary to hurry back to the trail and make a hasty retreat in order that he could collect his thoughts and make a plan of action before the ore train left the defiles of the gorge.

He ran fast, outdistancing the horses and men by fully a hundred yards, before he slackened his pace to a brisk walk. Suddenly a voice even louder and more commanding than that of Demons sounded from the rear.

"Halt—whoa, *Demons*—come here—someone ahead!" it shouted.

Pete heard the drivers order their animals to a halt, and saw the lights cluster above his tracks in the snow.

"One coming in, and one going out, same tracks. He's seen us." It was Demons shouting now.

Then two lights left the others, and came at a rapid pace toward the spot where Pete stood—waiting.

Putting all the energy he could into the effort, he rushed wildly about—making tracks here, there and everywhere, running trails first to one side and then to the other, hoping thus

to give his trackers the impression that he was not alone.

Then, whipping his guns from his belt, he fired twelve times up the trail, well over the heads of his pursuers, racing in circles as he did so, causing the jagged flare from his guns to pierce the darkness from as many points as possible. Almost instantly an answering volley came crashing down the gulch from the sleighs. Pete instantly sprang to one side of the trail, crouching low from the screaming lead above him. But even as he did so, he observed the light that led the rest flicker and fall to the snow, and he thought he heard a groan, as though from a man badly hurt.

The men continued firing in the darkness, first one and then the other shouting commands and challenging each other in utter confusion. Hearing the turmoil Pete made the most of his lone chance, and raced just off the trail directly toward the sleds, where the horses reared and plunged in the semi-darkness. Drawing near, he observed two men tugging at the bits, and cursing the horses between shouts to the men ahead.

Gasping for breath Pete joined the struggling men and shouted, "Hurry, back to the mine!"

In the wild confusion the ruse worked, and the men came near upsetting their precious

loads, as they wheeled the prancing, snorting horses about. Pete, crowding close as though to help, watched for his chance, and brought down the butt of his gun with a sickening thud on the head of the nearest teamster. Quickly taking the gun from his limp victim's belt, he crouched between the horses and sprang upon the remaining man. Taken completely un-awares, the struggle lasted but a moment, and the man crumpled beside his fallen mate.

Pete was none too quick; already the men down the trail had ceased their firing, and once more the loud voice of Demons seemed to prevail upon them.

With sweeping lashes of the teamster's whip, Pete started the horses on a wild run back toward the Dead Horse Mine. No sooner were they under way, however, than Demons and his gang discovered the stunned teamsters and started in angry pursuit, firing from rifles and guns at the fast-disappearing sled. The ore had been strapped on well, and in spite of the swerving, rolling course of the sled, the heavily loaded sacks held their places and Pete soon swept beyond the danger of flying bullets. He knew by the slope of the trail that he was several miles from the mine. His heart beat in wild exultation as he thought of the precipitous gorge along which the trail ahead skirted, and, as soon as he passed beyond danger of flying

bullets, he calmed the runaway horses as best he could, and made ready for it.

Recovered from their early fright, the horses strained evenly at their harness as the first incline was reached. Time and again, Pete found it necessary to ply the whip, as the horses seemed stalled in their tracks; but they made the grade, sticking close to the wall as they picked their way gingerly along.

Once above the yawning space along which the trail skirted, Pete quickly drew his knife, cut the binding ropes and sent bag after bag of the precious ore crashing down the side of the cliff, where he knew it would be safe until far into the next summer.

With rapid movements he stripped all the harness except the bridles from the panting horses. Then, giving the long line of sleds a final shove after the ore sacks, he sprang on the back of one of the animals, and leading the other behind, he galloped on toward the mine.

He knew he was fully an hour in advance of Demons and the men behind, yet he knew not what to expect at the bunk houses above, so he increased his speed to the utmost.

Dawn was not yet breaking when the lone light on the gable of the main house loomed before him. Quietly dismounting, he tied his steaming horses to convenient bushes, hiding them from the trail as best he could. For a

moment he hesitated, to pat the faithful heads of the horses. Precious as time was, he could not continue his fight, until he had first sneaked to the several new buildings he found clustered about the entrance of the tunnel, where for nearly a quarter of an hour he searched, before finally coming onto two bits of old canvas, with which he covered the fast chilling bodies of the horses.

First he listened intently for sounds of his pursuers. Observing no evidence of life about, he made for the small window of the bunk house he remembered. In the dim light that emanated from the single lantern overhead, he observed that many new bunks had been added to the ones he remembered. One end of the room too had been partitioned off, and he made out a sign on a door in the center of it that might be "Office" or "Private," he could not be sure.

Pete remembered the words of Hawkins, words that Buller had first spoken to Tam:

"The officials will be there to receive the deed," he had said. Why at the mine?—he wondered. The more he considered the words, the less he believed them, yet he hoped against hope that Buller had this time spoken the truth, and he hurried around the side of the house and made for the far end of the building. A light there streamed out of a window. He hurried

on to investigate it, but the foundation of the building rested almost on the edge of the cliff, and he found progress to a spot below the window not only slow, but hazardous in the extreme. Once there, he considered long before determining what his next step would be. He knew he dared not show his face to the light, for once his presence became known, his plan would be spoiled. He heard voices within, but could not make out the meaning of the low spoken words. With his naked finger he traced the cracks between the boards that formed the end of the building. Selecting the widest one, he drew his heavy clasp knife, and worked the point of the blade slowly between the boards. Gradually he sliced splinter after splinter, until the pent up light from within came out in a stream fully a quarter of an inch wide. Then, lying prone on the snow, he placed his ear to the opening and listened. Browning was there! And at the sound of his voice, Pete felt a rush of blood to his head that threatened to drown out his hearing; the distinct note of triumph in the voice angered him to the point of desperation.

"And Sharpe's there to receive it," Browning was saying.

"Tell me again, Ern, how much do you think that stuff is worth?"

"Don't know," Houston grunted.

"Oh, come, Ern, can't you be cheerful for a minute?" Browning urged. "You're the damnedest man I ever knew, Ern; here you've won; got the deed; we've got the gold, six sled loads of it, and I'm hanged if you've said fifty words all night."

If Pete could have seen the pleased gleam in Silent Ern's eyes as he gloated over his victory, he would have understood that Browning was merely trying again to force the lawyer into a new way of expressing himself, and that his words were not a true measure of the lawyer's state of mind.

At Browning's words, Houston did seem to brighten up, however, as he replied: "Well, Demons says there's millions where these loads came from. Probably quarter of a million's worth on the sleds."

"Then, I'm right, huh? You ought to be jumping up and down thanking your lucky stars or—"

"Or our San Francisco lawyer—" Ern added significantly.

"Say," Browning's voice fairly bubbled with praise, "Sam is a wonder! Ern, you and Sam together are the fastest workers in the United States. No—by Jove—in the world! Let's have a drink." Pete heard the clinking of glasses, then Browning, continuing—between smacks of his pudgy lips.

"But, say, who's the little old goat that's hopping around town lately like a flock of fleas?"

"Don't know. He's been too busy at the Land Office to suit me," Ern replied.

"How long's he been here?" Browning asked, and it seemed to Pete that his voice had a color of seriousness in it.

"Nearly two weeks now."

"Oh, well—cheer up, Ern, have another drink," glasses clinked again, and Browning continued.

"This thing was *sure* to break some time. I wouldn't be surprised if he's some stockholder of Sharpe's trying to make trouble. Whew, this old Gopher's mine certainly came in at the right time, didn't it?"

"Ye—es," Ern seemed to hesitate as he answered. "Ye—es, it certainly has relieved matters."

It seemed from the way he spoke that he had already lost the enthusiasm Browning had tried so hard to instil.

"Oh, for heaven's sake, Ern, come out and say *yes*, damnit—*yes*, like that!" Browning fairly shouted the words. "Ern, some day I'm going to get a gun and make you admit something, anything, without your infernal qualifying all the time."

Browning, in spite of his effort to be cock-

sure of success, betrayed the uncertainty that was working within himself, pulling his nerves to shreds, it seemed.

"Well, this mine isn't ours yet. Not until we record this deed," Pete heard Ern tap a paper as he spoke.

"But we've *got* it, haven't we? Great heavens, two days ago we were all up in the air, now we've got our money in sight again, and you have the deed, what more do you want?"

"Just to record it—that's all, we've got absolutely no contract covering the property. All we have is the deed, if anything happens—before we record—"

At this point Houston's words were drowned by a loud smashing kick, following which Pete heard the door leading to the office fly open—as some one entered noisily.

"Robbed!" Demon's voice thundered—"two men killed—horses, ore, sleds, everything gone—where are they?"

Perhaps a look of consternation and complete bewilderment that came over Browning and Houston checked a further wild outburst. At any rate, after his first loud words, absolute silence ensued, so far as Pete could determine.

Someone had closed the door, and now sounds of men rushing about in the darkness of the sleeping quarters made it impossible to

make out further conversation. As he listened intently to the general confusion, he knew that the time had arrived for his final stroke, and he boldly made his way toward the door of the building.

As he entered the building, several men, apparently stragglers from the lost ore train rushed past him and joined the excited group within. No one observed his presence, as he cautiously picked his way thru the shadows toward the office in the rear. On coming up to it, he hesitated a moment before the knob of the door, uncertain whether he should first try it gently, and risk the chance of putting the three men inside on their guard, or whether he should smash his full weight against it, finish the work inside, and take his chance with the men in the long room; rough and hardy men who would certainly attack, once they heard his bold crash.

He decided on the former plan, and ripping his gun from its holster, he opened the door silently, and stepped into the presence of Browning, Houston and Demons.

"Shut up!" he growled, leveling his gun full at the heads of the bewildered trio.

"One word and I drill the three of you—up with your lily-whites, J. D.—your name's written on every bullet in this gun, and I'm making deliveries damn sudden!"

Browning's teeth chattered loudly as he

looked over the gun into the wild eyed, bushy haired Pete, who loomed like a young giant before them. The harsh commands sizzled through Pete's teeth like escaping steam, and his body shook as though the pressure of pent-up rage was about to burst into action.

"Down—Demons—down on your belly; quick! Hands over your back—look into the floor! *There*, that way"—Pete could restrain himself no longer, and as he observed Demons' hand reach for a gun, he emphasized his commands by lifting a heavy boot to the back of Demons' head, bringing it down in a way that smashed the villainous face of the engineer into the coarse spruce planks. The action was a rash one, for Demons cried loudly in pain. Someone in the long room without, heard the cry, and knocked on the door. Pete turned to Browning.

"Order them to stay out—quick, or I shoot!" as he spoke, he pressed the trigger of his gun until the hammer moved backwards visibly.

"D—d—don't c o m e i n—st—st—s t a y o u t!" Browning fairly shouted the last words, and Pete heard the men at the door walk noisily away.

"Now—Mr. Best Lawyer in the World, hand over that deed"—Pete commanded steadily of Houston.

Aside from a deathlike pallor that came over his face, and a murderous look in his eyes, Houston showed no sign of emotion as he handed over the precious papers—marked in big black type, “QUIT CLAIM DEED.”

Pete took it savagely from his hand and held it over the flaming lamp until it burned to a black char in his fingers.

“Now, Mr. Houston, a little paper and a pencil—and lay it on the table. So! Now both of you—down with Demons—quick, and I won’t make a blood-pie out of your face like I did for your crooked engineer here!”

Then, dividing his attention between his prostrate prisoners and the paper on the table, Pete hastily scrawled a note to Hawkins.

“Come to Moapa at once—you and Susie,” it started. “The mine is once more yours—use the pass enclosed—*don’t talk to anyone and don’t sign anything.*” Pete scrawled his name beneath the writing, and turned again on his floored victims.

“Now Browning, get up—rest of you move your heads and I’ll squash ’em through the floor!”

Browning rose dizzily to his feet. “Now sit here and write what I tell you.” Pete dictated:

“It is very important that the bearer, Brud Hawkins, sole owner of the Dead Horse Mine,

and Susie—" here Pete hesitated—"Susie Tamarack—no just write Susie—arrive safely in Moapa. Do all you can to aid them. Now sign it," Pete ordered, as Browning's trembling hand finished with the note.

But even as he wrote, Browning seemed to regain his poise, and to collect his scattered wits. Observing this, Pete leaned toward him menacingly and rubbed the barrel of his gun along the promoter's nose.

"Do I have to kill you?" he grunted. Instantly the look of terror came back into Browning's eyes. He had faced desperate situations before, but never one in which the principal actor was a raging madman.

"N—n—no—for God's sake—whoever you are—take it away," he pleaded.

"Then quit thinking—and shut up!" snapped Pete, giving the gun a vicious jab that brought blood from a long cut it inflicted on Browning's nose.

"Now you two birds get up," he ordered, and at the command, Demons and Houston scrambled to their feet. Demons seemed to want to talk—but one glance at the blood-smeared face of Browning changed his mind.

"Now—all of you sit down and look natural," Pete continued. "Browning—when I open the door, you holler out just what I say

—and nothing else. Wait a minute first—name a man who knows the mountains.”

“I—I—don’t know any,” Browning stammered.

Pete turned on Demons. “You do—name a man out there who can locate the trapper’s cabin where Hawkins is staying.”

“I don’t know the men—and Hawkins is dead.”

“You’re lying,” Pete thundered, and jabbed his gun close to the puffed lips of the engineer. “Now name a man—tell the truth or you’ve lied for the last time, you cowardly hound!”

“Pierre—Pierre Eliot—he knows the mountains, and he’s back.”

“Ah—that’s better—much better.”

Pete opened the door—standing inside its shelter, allowing only space enough at the opening to permit Browning’s voice to carry out.

“Call Pierre—” he whispered harshly to Browning.

A minute more and Pierre entered the room. Pete closed the door and as he did so, the ’breed got a full view of his shaggy face. For a moment he quavered and looked uncertainly from one solemn face to the other about the room.

“Pierre,” Pete began, “your brother is near

death from the blizzard. He is at the cabin with Hawkins."

"Jacques—eet ees heem you mean?"

Pete nodded his head. Pierre was visibly affected by the news, and as he spoke he crossed himself and rolled his eyes toward the ceiling.

"But he is not dead"—Pete continued, "I saved him."

"Mercie—mercie on you, Meester Alden," the excitable breed broke in, before Pete could continue.

"But wait—I am not finished—do you know the cabin?"

"Ah, the cabain—he ess one Bannerie—my frien' it ees good."

"Then you must go to that cabin—Pierre—it is Mr. Browning's order. Listen to this"—he read both the note he had written to Hawkins as well as the pass Browning had signed.

Browning, prompted by an ominous jab from Pete's concealed gun, nodded his head in violent approval of Pete's orders, and Pierre left in haste to carry the message.

"Now, down on your faces again!" Pete snapped, turning on the silent three.

For the first time, Pete observed that it was already daylight, and by the murky color of the bit of sky he could see through the square window pane, he knew that a storm was gathering.

Uttering a final threat to the prostrate men, he searched the office desk and table for papers, and the entire room for guns. Tucking what he found in his spacious pockets, he jerked open the door, and brandished his guns wildly. Three times he blazed away close over the heads of the startled miners.

"Line up, along the wall—quick—hands high!" he shouted, firing again, this time into the boards near the feet of the group nearest him.

Following the tense excitement of the early morning ore-train stampede, an episode which had already reached the proportions of an Indian massacre, in exaggerated accounts that circulated among the men, the miners, unarmed in the main, were only too willing to obey the shot-punctuated commands of the wild looking figure that loomed so suddenly before them.

"There's men layin' for you all along the road. If you're wise you're staying right here—all day"—Pete thundered, as he edged toward the door—"and don't forget the tunnel's full of dynamite—if you're more than anxious to die—go in there." With these final words he emptied one of his guns—shooting jagged holes into the floor and through the upper part of the office door in the rear, before he finally backed out of the room, and dashed for the

thicket of brush behind which the blanketed horses stood.

A moment more and he was galloping down the trail, snow flying from the horses' hoofs and his fur coat waving out behind him as he raced. Thus he rode for nearly two hundred yards along the trail before the first crack of rifles sounded from the rear. But for the abrupt turn in the trail around which he whirled, he would surely have fallen before the deadly hail of steel-jacketed lead that whistled above him.

Once out of danger he slowed the horse he rode, and the one behind, to a trot and prepared for a long tedious ride to the pass below.

Snow was falling as he rounded the last slippery turn in the trail and looked for the first time since his poker game of months before, upon the cluster of cabins that housed Jenkins and his crew at Salmon Tooth Pass.

Fifty yards from the buildings he halted. There was no evidence of life in the cabins; yet he felt that he was under observation. He saw fresh tracks leading to the back door, tracks still visible in spite of the heavy fall of snow.

Convinced that his only hope of getting through the narrow pass lay in bold and prompt action, he urged his horses to a trot and pulled up a few yards from the door.

Eighteen miles of bare-back riding had rendered his badly abused muscles stiff and unwieldy, and as he hoisted his leg with great difficulty over the back of his horse, he slipped and fell heavily to the snow. Even as he sprawled about, and before he could regain his feet, the door of the cabin flew open and three armed men rushed out.

The leader was Jenkins, who for a moment stood over the prostrate form of Pete scowling uncertainly as though to fix the identity of the man, in his mind.

"Get up—hands first—and keep them high," he ordered as Pete struggled to rise.

"All right—Mr. Jenkins—but why the guns?"

At the sound of Pete's voice, the expression on Jenkins' face changed.

"Ah—it *is* Alden. I thought so." Jenkins turned to one of his companions. "Sheriff, here's your man—he's come to meet you. You'd better hustle him right off. There may be more up the gulch. Certainly had help in that hold up this morning!"

The sheriff advanced on Pete with a gun in one hand and a pair of heavy iron hand-cuffs in the other.

"Peter Alden—you're under arrest! I'm the sheriff of Moapa County—stick out your hands!"

Resistance was useless, so Pete regained his composure as quickly as possible, and held out his hands for the irons. Then he asked what the charges against him were.

The sheriff after securing his prisoner, read from a sheaf of papers:

"Passing worthless checks on the Bank of Moapa.

"Dynamiting the Dead Horse Mine.

"Stealing clothing and valuable papers.

"Highway robbery, and—"

"I guess that's enough—let's go," Pete interrupted, leaning his weary manacled arms over the back of the horse.

A moment more and the armed men, with Pete in the center, started for Moapa.

* * * *

CHAPTER XVIII

HEAR ye—Hear ye—Hear ye—The Superior Court of Moapa County, State of Montana is called to order!"

The melancholy drone of the bailiff failed to check the buzz of conversation.

"This is what I call bringing 'em to justice quick."

"Understand Ern Houston's been sworn in to prosecute this case."

"They say J. D.'s got it in for the prisoners, and he always wins."

Bang! Bang! Bang! The bailiff's gavel drowned the loudly whispered words, and produced a hush of silence over the court room.

The Judge calmly finished a glass of water and announced: "The case of People vs. Peter Alden, Jr., Brud Hawkins, Susie Morgan, et al."

Pete, a picture of utter dejection, shuffled wearily in his chair in the prisoner's box. Hawkins and Tam, who sat beside him, shared his wretchedness.

The Judge spoke.

"Mr. Houston, I understand that you are representing the District Attorney's office in the prosecution of this case."

"I am, your Honor," Houston, efficient and alert as ever, seemed bubbling over with confidence, as he stood for a moment and replied to the Judge. Then he sat down and continued whispering words to Browning and Sharpe, who sat with him at the counsel's table, leaning back comfortably in their well-padded chairs.

The Court continued.

"The defendants in this case, having pleaded not guilty to the charges brought against them, have further stated that they are unable to provide counsel for themselves. The state has, therefore, appointed Jud Weeks to defend them. Is Mr. Weeks present?"

Browning winked covertly at Houston, leaned toward him and whispered, "Where is he, Ern?"

"He's had a wild night, but he'll be here in a minute," Houston answered.

The Judge raised his voice and asked again: "Is Mr. Weeks present?"

Sharpe nudged Houston, who quickly arose and addressed the Court:

"Your Honor, I understand that the attorney for the defense has been delayed. I have every reason to believe, however, that he will be here very shortly."

"Mr. Houston," the Court replied, "it is not the duty of the prosecuting attorney's office

to account for the attorney of the defense. This is the first case over which this court has presided. Mr. Weeks has been appointed to defend the accused, but if he is not in court, this case will be set ahead on the calendar. The charges brought against the accused are extremely grave ones, and every consideration must be shown them in procuring a proper defense."

Houston sat down and whispered again to Browning. "Of all the Judges in Montana, the Governor certainly appointed the wrong one for us; this bird would convict his own mother if she was guilty."

The Judge spoke to the prisoners.

"Peter Alden, can you or those accused with you, advise the Court if Mr. Weeks intends to be present?"

Hawkins, strong and vigorous, but trembling with emotion, answered before Pete could reply.

"Your Honor, Mr. Weeks has not seen us more than thirty minutes during all the while we've been in jail. No one has been allowed to see us. I don't believe"

He was suddenly interrupted by Pete, who tugged violently at his coat, waving his free hand frantically as he did so in the direction of a group of men who entered the court room in the rear.

Instantly everyone in the room turned to see the cause of his sudden frantic elation.

The bailiff banged his gavel and shouted, "Order in the court room."

Browning paled perceptibly as he leaned over toward Sharpe and Houston. "It's that damn goat," he whispered, "what's he doing here? Do you know the men with him?"

"Uncle John, Judge Stivers!" Pete called aloud, his deep voice filling the court room.

Again the bailiff's gavel banged for silence.

Judge Stivers, erect, proud and defiant, looked neither to the right nor left, as he came with quick, springy steps through the rail of the attorney's inclosure and directly up to the Judge. His long-trained judicial voice caused the entire court room to hush breathlessly as he spoke.

"May it please the Court, I have here certain credentials to present."

So saying he handed over a bundle of papers, but the Court had already recognized its distinguished visitor, and with both arms extended, grasped the hand of Judge Stivers, and shook it warmly.

"The Court will adjourn for fifteen minutes," the Judge annouced briefly, and hurried with the visitor to private chambers.

Again the gavel sounded and court re-convened.

The enthusiasm that radiated from the prisoner's box spread rapidly over the entire room. Houston, Browning and Sharpe alone seeming suddenly chilled. They twitched nervously at papers and whispered excitedly among themselves. During the recess Demons and Jud Weeks had entered the court room, and now sat in conference with the three.

"It appears," the Court announced, "that the State of Montana has for some time past been honored by the presence of Judge Jonathan Stivers, who for twenty years has enjoyed the distinction of being one of the leading jurists of the State of California. Although he needs no credentials in any court in the land, he has presented today all of the papers, signed by the Governor of this State, and has taken other necessary steps to admit himself to practice in this court, in the case now at bar."

Houston, shaking visibly, arose to his feet.

"Your Honor, as the Attorney for the People, I would like to examine his credentials."

The papers were duly handed over, but the overwhelming blow was too much for even the astute Houston, and he made the most of a bad beginning by stipulating that Judge Stivers be admitted to defend the prisoners at bar.

For the first time Judge Stivers permitted his eyes to meet those of the astounded and radiantly happy Pete. With difficulty he signaled

as best he could that the prisoners should maintain a quiet, dignified manner while the formalities of the trial were in order. Then, as the necessary details were being arranged, he walked quietly over to the box, shook hands calmly with his clients, conferred with them briefly and then informed the Court that he was willing to proceed to trial.

Following his remarks, the Court asked: "Is the State ready?"

"Ready," Houston replied.

"Is the defense ready?"

Stivers addressed the Court.

"Your Honor, in this rather unusual matter of the People vs. Peter Alden, Jr., Brud Hawkins, Susie Morgan and others, I move that the case be dismissed

"First: because the papers filed in the case are wholly illegal and irregular, as will be pointed out if the occasion demands;

"Second: because the complaining witness, a certain J. D. Browning, now in this court, together with every material witness they have designated to be called, towit: Thomas Sharpe, Peleg Demons and one Len Jenkins, are all and each of them about to be arrested under a Federal indictment, charging embezzlement and fraud, and;

"Third: Because the man sitting here, representing himself to be an attorney in good

standing, Ernest Houston by name, is not only wanted on the same indictment as the others just before mentioned, but in addition faces an indictment handed down by a Grand Jury in San Francisco, charging conspiracy and criminal persecution in unlawfully causing the arrest and imprisonment of one Halburt Morgan, brother of the accused"

At these words, a shriek of delight from Tam in the prisoner's box, precipitated general confusion and excited comment throughout the room.

The bailiff pounded loudly and called upon officers present to restore order.

Stivers, still calm and dignified, waited until the court room was again quiet, then continued:

"Regarding the charge of fictitious checks brought against Peter Alden, one of the scoundrels who signed the information, is James Hogan, alias Jimmy Duff, alias Buller Garret, wanted for murder"

At these words still another wild commotion broke out, as Buller Garret, seated in the back of the court room, attempted to rush the guards at the door.

Order again restored, Stivers tried to continue, but the Court interrupted.

"The motion is granted," the Judge announced, then raising his hand for silence, con-

tinued: "The Court takes this occasion, and wishes to go on record, as sincerely thanking Peter Alden, Jr., Brud Hawkins and Susie Morgan, for the great part, so Judge Stivers has informed this Court, that they have taken in bringing to justice the culprits against whom the Federal indictments referred to have been brought. During the brief recess period Judge Stivers, the attorney for the defense, exhibited a record of atrocities perpetrated by the indicted men sitting at the prosecuting attorney's table that are more heinous than anything this Court has heretofore seen. The defense counsel states that Susie Morgan is largely responsible for this mass of evidence"

At this point in the Court's statement, Pete could restrain himself no longer, and grasping both of Tam's slender hands, he drew close to her ear, until his shaggy beard mingled with her wavy brown hair. What he whispered there doesn't matter; but what she whispered in reply sent Pete's heart pounding in sudden ecstasy.

Old Hawkins took it all in, like the sage he was, then leaned over and whispered to them both.

"She sent her precious record to your Uncle John long ago, Pete, but the foxy old codger wouldn't let us say a word to any"

At this point the Court raised its voice and

drew the attention even of the ex-prisoners.

"I understand," the Court was saying, "that Federal officers are here present. The case before the bar is therefore dismissed, and court adjourned, in order that they may do their duty."

Pete, fairly dragging Tam and Hawkins with him, staggered forward and took the slender form of Judge Stivers in his arms and fairly shook the tender words of greeting from him.

"Oh, Mr. Stivers, I thought you had forgotten us, where *have* you been?" Tam asked between sobs of joy.

"Only way to do it, little girl; if those crooks had seen us talking together, we might have had a harder time."

"Judge Stivers," Hawkins' trembling voice broke in, "I've had many a happy day in my fifty odd years, but this one is the best of all. The girl here didn't know what to do with her evidence, but I know men. When Pete addressed those poker cards to you, I knew you ought to have Tam's stuff, too. I knew from the first Pete was not"

"Not a thief," Pete broke in, "go on, say it."

"Oh, *that*," Stivers interrupted, "Pete tried to convict himself, that's all, by writing such a fool letter to us; the office manager stole the money."

"Then father knows?" it was the first time Pete had had an opportunity to ask the one question uppermost in his mind.

"Yes, you young gorilla," old Stivers had been waiting for the question, "I left him with the Governor at Helena; he'll be here tonight. Now for Heaven's sake come and get cleaned up; hire all the barbers in town; we want to have a family dinner tonight, just we five."

* * * *

That night, under the soft lights of a private dining room, the best Moapa could furnish, Pete, again the well-bred, immaculately dressed city man, affectionately patted the shoulder, first of his father, whose fond eyes fairly devoured him, and then of Judge Stivers, who continued to berate both Pete and his father, in good natured fun, telling them repeatedly, between winks at Hawkins and Tam, that old Uncle John had to come to the rescue after all.

It was probably the happiest moment in the life of Brud Hawkins, and already he was making plans for the future of the Dead Horse Mine; plans that included a huge dredge for the placer miners.

Tam alone, could scarcely restrain the tears of joy that kept welling to her eyes as she asked

over and over again about her brother. Once she whispered covertly to Hawkins, "Things *do* come out like stories, *sometimes*, *don't* they?"

"Well, Peter, my son," old Alden finally announced over his cigar and coffee, "you are an Alden after all. I always knew you would come through, somehow, after you had learned to buck the waves"—looking meaningly at Stivers. "Now that you have made the conquest of the hills, I presume you will condescend to return to San Francisco?"

"Yes, father," Pete's words came confusedly fast as he looked full into the blushing face of Tam, "yes, when I've finished the conquest."

He continued to look at her, even after he had spoken. Then observing the evident discomfiture of Hawkins, he added:

"But maybe the Dead Horse Mine needs a laborer, and I think, Dad, that you and Uncle John both need a change of air. They say the mountains here are wonderful in the spring-time, aren't they, Tam?"

"Oh . . . just wonderful," she murmured.

THE END.

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